

## Leaf footed bugs and pomegranates

Human beings are not the only creatures who come out during warm weather; some very annoying insects appear and become major pests on some of our favorite fruit trees. The Mojave Desert is not a commercially important fruit production region, but home orchards are popular. Despite the generally infertile soils and intense summer weather, some fruit trees



*Pomegranate blossom*

thrive in this challenging area. Among the surprising producers are pomegranates.

These are among the most beautiful fruit trees or shrubs in home landscapes. There are ornamental varieties that produce only lovely flowers. In spring, fruiting varieties produce lipstick red flowers, almost an inch and a half across, that develop into a unique globe shaped fruit.

Probably a native of Iran, this plant has been cultivated since at least the time of the Phoenicians over 3,000 years ago. It appeared on the coins of ancient Judea, a symbolic for fruitfulness. Since then, it has spread across the world, and is important in

herbal treatments for a range of health problems. In a number of Renaissance Madonna paintings, the infant holds a pomegranate as a symbol of resurrection.

It does not grow well in the Northeast, but as long as it is not exposed to freezing temperatures for long periods, and is placed in soil with good drainage, it will thrive. Selective pruning can keep a tree to a manageable size, but even when kept small, the plant will produce an abundance of delicious seeds wrapped in a luscious pulp, surrounded by a hard skin. In addition to its global popularity with humans, this is a plant with its own set of problems. The same conditions that make a healthy, happy plant can also make a healthy, happy pest.

A major problem for pomegranates is leaf footed bug (*Leptoglossis*), which gets inside the fruit, and destroys it. An infestation is not only unsightly, it can ruin a crop. The adults are long lived and can be very prolific. A single fruit has been known to hold up to 100 nymphs, juveniles that look much like small versions of their parents.

Control of these cousins of stink bugs and squash bugs can be a challenge.

As with so many problems, prevention is best: remove remaining fruit from previous years and clean up weeds where they overwinter. In the Southwest, where winters are usually mild, this is a critical step.



*Squash bug*

Despite best efforts, bugs can appear, attracted by their favorite foods. Few conventional pesticides are labeled for control on pomegranates. Organic, biological agents may be promising. Pyrethrins are moderately effective, but these can be harmful to bees and other pollinators. In El Salvador, some researchers had success using Neem oil, but this has not been replicated widely. The soil-borne fungus, *Beauveria bassiana*, kills many insect pests, including true bugs, and there is some study of it as a leaf footed bug control agent. This may not be a viable option for this region, since it appears to need high relative humidity. Still, it may be worth exploring, especially when pomegranates show distress from these pests.

Dr. Angela O'Callaghan is the Social Horticulture Specialist for University of Nevada Cooperative Extension. Contact [ocallaghana@unce.unr.edu](mailto:ocallaghana@unce.unr.edu) or 702-257-5581.