



PHOTO COURTESY OF MAGGIE YATES

Axel, an Australian shepherd, awaits the command to sniff out bedbugs. Trained for the service Axel's nose is increasing demand, hired by customers of Maggie Yates of HighWater Dogs.

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issue. As Street Roots goes to press, a bill is under consideration in the New York State Assembly that would require landlords to disclose to prospective tenants any history of infestation, both in the building and in the unit offered for rent. The original draft called for five years of documented history, though that was knocked back to one year as a concession to responsible landlords who had promptly dealt with the problem.

One particular Portland story illustrates how serious an issue disclosure can be. Ione Burak was one of 37 tenants required to move out of the Admiral during the year it took to remodel the building. When she went to Pearl Court to apply for an apartment, she said, "I need to know whether or not you have a bug infestation."

It's a matter of life and death for me." Burak, who has a heart condition, can't withstand insecticide poisoning.

As Burak tells it, "The manager trilled, 'Oh, no, no, no, we don't have any problems like that.'"

Yet within a week after she moved in, while chatting with

other tenants in the lobby, Burak heard a different story: "The building is full of them," one girl told me. She said there were ten apartments with bed bugs on her floor alone."

So Burak went back to the manager. "Shame on you for being so reckless with my life," she said. "Why didn't you tell me the truth? I begged you to tell me."

"I couldn't because I'd be violating the tenants' civil rights," she told me."

Burak, who has worked as an apartment manager, replied, "Don't feed me that stuff. I have rights too."

To protect herself, Burak spent her year at Pearl Court never admitting a single guest into her room and being scrupulously careful never to set down anything anywhere in the building. She got back to the Admiral bug-free, though it was a year of high stress. Randy Cohen's syndicated "On Ethics" column, which ran in the April 3 Oregonian under "Tenants Have a Right To Know About Bugs," expressed it well: "...the building's management company should warn all tenants about (any) infestation, so that you will not be embarrassed or become the target of neighborly animosity...If the building were on fire, I hope the management company would not be silent for fear of 'spreading panic.'" The question of whether or not to disclose, by the way, was sent in by the owner of a New York co-op apartment.

Let's not lull ourselves into thinking that the problem is restricted to low-rent apartment buildings. In Portland, downtown hotels have been hit, as have hospitals,

clinics and nursing homes.

At the Multnomah County Health Department's Westside clinic, Dr. Patricia Kullberg sees bedbugs "all the time. It's horrible! We see the bites, (patients) bring in the bugs, they deposit them in our exam room, and we have to fumigate."

On April 18th of this year, Linda Crewson, who works as a CNA at Robison Jewish Nursing Home, sent a letter to the Oregonian about having disagreed with how her supervisor intended to handle an infestation in the room of a 97-year-old resident. The paper ran it, though unfortunately not in the print edition; rather they deep-sixed it into their blog.

Bedbugs made local news just two months before the Cascadian Terrace incident, when they were seen running around the lobby at OHSU. According to both KATU and the Oregonian, the hospital took an aggressive approach and sealed off that area entirely during the several weeks of fumigation.

That "several weeks" only begins to suggest the resistance put up by bedbugs. Because they are small and nocturnal, you probably will not know you brought them home until they start disturbing your sleep at night: bites are red and itchy, and often in clusters of two and three. Since fumigations do not kill the eggs, your room will have to be re-fumigated after they hatch into nymphs, at least ten days later. If you leave town, they'll be waiting for you when you get back: they can go for a year without a blood feed. And if you live in an apartment, they can migrate under baseboards and through electrical outlets, or simply saunter across the hall.

The good news is you can actually see them: flat and wingless, a hungry adult looks like a brown lentil; a fed adult turns reddish and distends to the shape of an apple seed.

"Our building engineer has done tons of research on his own on the Internet," says Washington. "And our service coordinator helps people get ready who just can't cope." The fumigations, to be effective, entail washing and bagging clothing and bedding, as well as moving furniture away from the walls and emptying drawers. "It's expensive. It's labor intensive. It's crucial to have help getting them prepped." (Over at Aging and Disability Services, thousands of dollars have been spent sending caregivers out to help clients with this same task.)

Anyone who serves in one of these helping positions has to be careful not to let the bugs hitchhike out of the affected apartment. "My maintenance people strip before they go home," Washington says. "Their uniforms stay at the Tower and they're laundered here."

"Some pieces of furniture just have to be thrown out. Lazy Boys are very difficult to treat. Hospital beds are, too. The bugs get up into the tubing."

"We buy mattress covers that are made of a treated fabric. They're a good grade and — if properly installed — they're certified as

bedbug proof," Washington says, looking a little rueful at what an encyclopedia she's had to become on this subject. "When you spray, you take off electrical covers and lift up the edges of the carpet. And when you're moving contaminated material out, everything is bagged and taped."

Martin Rebhahn, Pest Control Coordinator for REACH Community Development Corporation, is busy establishing best practices for the 1,500 units owned by REACH. "When we throw out furniture, we slash it, shrink wrap it, and paint BEDBUGS on the plastic," Rebhahn says. "We don't want someone thinking, 'oh, here's a nice mattress or couch' or whatever, and taking it home." Metro Multifamily Housing Association, which provides education for landlords, has offered forums on the identification and eradication of bedbugs. The current issue of their monthly publication, Landlord Times, carries two large ads for exterminators, both of which place the word BEDBUGS front and center, and an ad for a canine inspection service out of Tacoma.

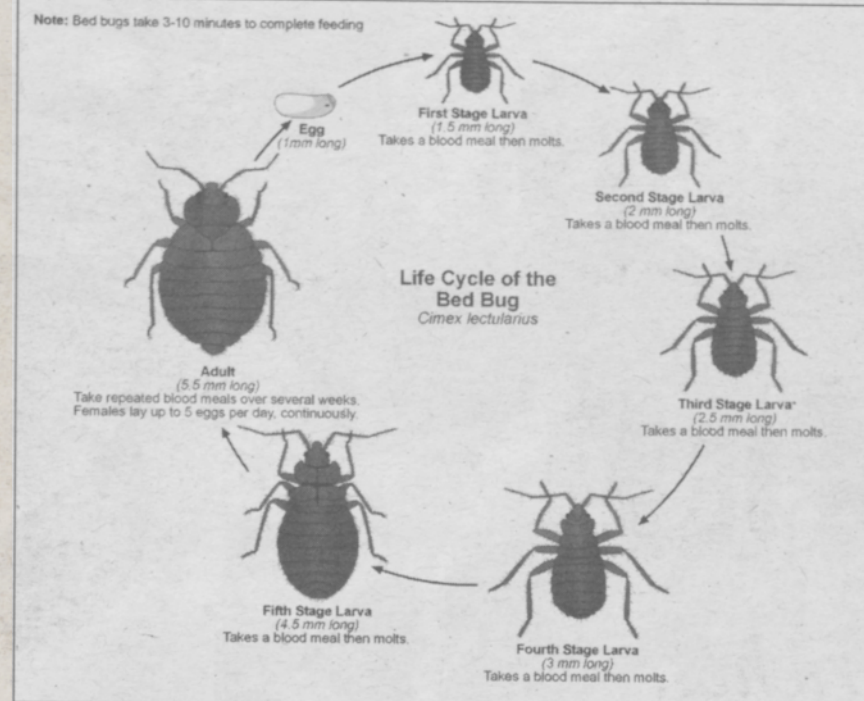
Portland also has its own working dog: Axel, an Australian shepherd who is increasingly in demand. Maggie Yates, the owner of HighWater Dogs ("I always said I'd find a way to work with my dogs, come hell or high water.") has been driving Axel to Portland homes for the last six months, where he sniffs out that sickly sweet smell that confirms the bad news.

Over the last few years, the County Health Department has worked to educate the community about bedbugs; it's time for us to start listening to what they have to say. It is in the best interest of us all — travelers and tenants, homeless and homeowners, caregivers and cab drivers — to get on top of this problem. We want to avoid evictions and we want to avoid lawsuits; we don't want the infestations to increase and we don't want the EPA to bring back DDT (as has been suggested). And we really don't want these nasty little blood-suckers destroying our sanity and our sleep.

Given the choice, I'd take one astonished little scorpion any day. Of 1,400 species, only 25 can kill you. I'd take those odds.



Note: Bed bugs take 3-10 minutes to complete feeding



Bedbugs: What You Can Do

Be Informed:

— The County Health Department has informative presentations on its website at www.mchealth.org/vector/bedbugs.shtml, featuring a 48-panel presentation by California Department of Health Services. If you capture a live bug and aren't sure what it is, call Multnomah County Vector Control: 503-988-3464. Don't let that word "vector" scare you: bedbugs don't carry disease, but Vector Control has an entomologist on staff.

— Unhoused: throw clothes, sleeping bag, blanket, the works into a hot wash and dry for one hour on the highest heat. Bedbugs can't survive at high temperatures.

— Housed: many fumigation companies in town now have bedbug expertise. Consider also the new heat treatment that hotels are using, provided by Green Team Oregon, out of Eugene (541) 607-9640. And if you are not certain you have bedbugs, try Axel the sniffing dog (503) 939-9420.

Be Vigilant:

— Don't let overnight guests bring bedrolls, blankets or pillows into your home unless you are certain their belongings are pest-free.

— Travelers: when you check into a hotel, don't put your suitcase down on the bed (the bathtub is a good place, or on top of a metal rack). Lift bedding and inspect mattress seams, pull the bed out from the wall and inspect headboard, pull out the bedside drawer and inspect the side facing the wall. If you find bedbugs, insist on another room: unlike with cockroaches, one room infested doesn't mean all are.

— Keep an eye out in limousines, taxicabs and on buses. TriMet staffers vacuum its rolling stock every night and wipes everything down, but they are also just learning about these critters, so if you find a bedbug, let them know. According to Communications staffer Becky Witt, TriMet is in touch with the County Health Department, and prepared to get professional help at the first sign of an outbreak.

Be Honest:

— Tenants: if you get an infestation, tell the landlord and get help. They are easier to eradicate before they get too numerous.

— Building managers: if your building has had an outbreak, let prospective tenants know. They'll feel more confident speaking to an informed, responsible manager than one who is in denial.

Be Conscientious:

— Don't put that infested easy chair out on the sidewalk with a sign that says "Free Furniture." Slash it, wrap it, label it and send it to the dump.

— Eradication of bugs from a few personal possessions is cheap; from a whole house, we're talking thousands of dollars. If you've been exposed to bugs, don't couch surf until you've dealt with the problem.