

POLK COUNTY URBAN HORTICULTURER NEWSLETTER

April 2004

OAK TREE CATERPILLARS

Judging from the number of telephone calls I have received during the last two weeks, there must be a bumper crop of oak tree caterpillars this year. There are a number of caterpillars that attack our oak trees in central Florida. One of the common ones is the forest tent caterpillar.



The larvae have a dark gray to brownish-black background body color, highlighted by broad, pale-blue lines and thin, broken yellow lines extending along each side. The larvae are also somewhat hairy, whitish in color and when mature are 2-2½ inches long. They are called tent caterpillars, but they do not actually construct tents. Eggs are laid in masses of 100-350 and hatch shortly after leaf emergence in the early spring. The larvae spin silken mats on the trunks and large branches where they congregate to molt or rest from feeding. You have probably seen these larvae hanging from silk strands, grouped in webs, or crawling up tree trunks, walls, on sidewalks, or driveways.

You will also see the tussock moth caterpillars. This caterpillar has long tufts of black hair on each end of the body, and has four white tufts of hair on its back. Another common caterpillar on oaks is a type of looper. As their name implies, they loop their body up in the air as they walk.

Most caterpillars themselves are relatively

harmless to people in that they do not sting or bite. But some people may have an allergic reaction when handling them. In addition, there are at least two caterpillars that are venomous, the puss caterpillar and saddleback caterpillar, which at times have been found on oak trees, but usually not in great numbers. The puss caterpillar is totally covered with hair and hardly looks like a caterpillar. The saddleback caterpillar has saddle images on its back and is easy to distinguish.



You can often see the pellets of caterpillar frass on surfaces under the trees. They also will congregate on other plant material under host trees, and can cause damage to these plants. They pupate in loosely spun silken cocoons - often on the eaves or soffits of your house. The cocoons can be very difficult to remove.

Trees most often attacked are various species of oak and gums, but they will attack other trees such as basswood, cherry and plum. Under heavy infestations they have been observed feeding on all sorts of woody ornamentals including citrus, pine, loquat, azalea, and roses. Populations fluctuate on a more or less regular basis. They reach outbreak proportions every 6-16 years and may be heavy for several years in a row. Seldom are trees killed during an outbreak, however repeated defoliation can lead to dieback and reduced growth. If the trees are otherwise healthy, the common host tree will usually re-foliate within a few weeks, following

the springtime defoliation. The caterpillars are generally just a nuisance that you have to put up with for a few weeks. If the infestation is severe, the trees can be sprayed with Thuricide or Dipel which should give some control.

LOVE BUGS

Since we are on the subject of spring insect pests, let's take a minute and discuss love bugs. These little pests are actually flies in the family Bibionidae. These flies were reported in Louisiana in the 1920's and by the 1940's had invaded Florida. By 1975 love bugs had spread



all over Florida, into Georgia and into South Carolina. It was erroneously reported that love bugs were introduced into Florida by the University of Florida and USDA entomologists. However, love bugs were well established in Florida before any research was conducted on them by the UF or USDA scientists.

Two flights occur each year - the spring flight occurs in late April and May and the second flight occurs in August and September. Flights extend over periods of 4-5 weeks. Mating takes place almost immediately after emergence of the females. Adult females live only 2-3 days and feed on nectar of various plants. Love bugs are attracted to irradiated exhaust fumes (gas and diesel fumes exposed to sunlight) at temperatures above 83 degrees F (usually between 10:00 a.m. and 4 p.m.). Also, hot engines and the vibrations of vehicles apparently contribute to the attraction of love bugs to highways.

Females may lay as many as 350 eggs which are usually deposited on decaying plant material. Larvae feed on the decaying plant material and live on the soil surface just

beneath the decaying organic matter. The larvae are often found in pastures under cow manure. They perform a beneficial function, because they convert plant material into organic components which can be used again by growing plants.

There isn't any practical way to control love bugs with insecticides in large areas, however smaller areas around a home could be sprayed with a registered insecticide. Love bug numbers have been reduced in recent years by predators such as birds and armadillos, and invertebrate organisms such as earwigs, beetle larvae and centipedes. There are a number of fungi which also can appreciably reduce larval populations. I don't know of any new introductions of parasites or predators.

There are several options available to lessen the problems facing motorists. By traveling at night motorists can avoid the bugs as love bugs do not become active until mid morning. Screens can be placed in front of the radiator to block incoming larvae. Also, deflector shields placed at the front of the hood helps reduce the number of love bugs impacting on the windshield and upper front finish.

Splattered bugs should be washed off the car as soon as possible. Love bugs are more easily removed, and the chance of damaging the finish on the car is lessened, if the car has been waxed recently. When the remains are left on the car for several days, the finish will often be permanently damaged. Soaking for several minutes with water aids in their removal. When love bugs are numerous, some motorists spread a light film of baby oil over the front of the hood above the windshield and on the grill and bumper. This practice will make removal a simpler task.

NATIVE SHRUBS FOR CENTRAL FLORIDA

by Anne Yasalonis, Coordinator FYN

As many people make the first trips of the spring to the nursery, they are usually looking for low maintenance and drought tolerant shrubs. By using native shrubs you can accomplish both of these things!



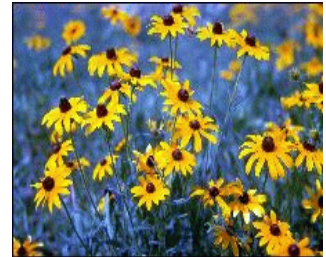
A few easy native shrubs for Central Florida:

1. **Florida Privet** - Great for a hedge or screen. The Florida Privet is a thick, dense evergreen shrub that can tolerate pruning and shaping. It's small, glossy green leaves and black fruit make it a very wildlife friendly shrub.
2. **Firebush** - This moderately sized shrub has bright red flowers all year long that appeal to both hummingbirds and butterflies. It can be used as a specimen or in a mixed shrub bed.
3. **Beautyberry** - This loose shaped shrub is best know for it's beautiful purple berry clusters that appear in the summer. Beautyberry is a deciduous shrub that is attractive to wildlife and can be used in a variety of settings.
4. **Virginia Sweetspire** - Adapts to dry soils very well. This is a small shrub that is known for it's beautiful white flower clusters in the spring. This shrub has a very natural form and can be used in beds, along ponds, or as a small hedge.
5. **Simpson's Stopper** - An excellent specimen or hedging plant. Produces fragrant white flowers in the spring followed by red fruit. This shrub has a variety of uses and can even be pruned to keep a compact form.
6. **Walter's Viburnum** - This is a great large shrub that provides a lot of benefit to wildlife.

It flowers profusely with white flowers in the spring and then fruits in the summer. It is an evergreen shrub that can be used for hedges or specimens.

For more native shrubs for Central Florida go to <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/EP022> or call the Extension office to have a copy sent to you.

MISC. APRIL GARDENING



Flowers to plant - African daisy, ageratum, aster, balsam, begonia, black-eyed Susan, blue daze, browallia, bush daisy, cat's whiskers, celosia, cleome, coleus, coreopsis, cosmos, crossandra, dahlberg daisy, gazania, gaillardia, gerbera, goldenrod, impatiens, Joseph's coat, lantana, lisianthus, marigold, melampodium, Mexican sunflower, moon flower, nicotiana, nierembergia, pentas, periwinkle, porterweed, portulaca, purslane, salvia, sunflower, torenia and zinnia.

Herbs to plant - Anise, basil, bay laurel, borage, cardamon, chives, coriander, dill, borage, ginger, lemon balm, oregano, Mexican tarragon, mint, oregano, rosemary, sage, savory, sweet marjoram and thyme.

Vegetables to plant - Calabaza, cantaloupe, cassava, chayote, cherry tomato, cucumber, dasheen, eggplant, Jerusalem artichoke, jicama, lima bean, malabar spinach, malanga, New Zealand spinach, okra, pepper, roselle, Seminole pumpkin, snap beans, squash, Southern pea, sweet potato, tamarillo, yam and yard long bean.

Florida bulbs - Don't forget bulbs for your Florida garden. There are a number of bulbs which do well in central Florida including the African lily, amaryllis, Eucharist lily, blood lily, caladium, canna, crinum, rain lily and spider lily. Most do

well in full sun to partial shade, but check the label to be sure.

When planting add plenty of organic matter like composted manure. Water when the soil below the surface becomes dry. Use a 2-3 inch layer of mulch and fertilize over the mulch three times per year - March, May and August with a good slow release fertilizer. Remove declining leaves as needed and divide every 3-4 years.

Soil testing - Do not add lime or dolomite to your lawn or garden until you have a pH test conducted, even if it is under an oak and you think the soil must be very acid from the oak leaves. Adding lime or dolomite to an already high pH may make matters worse. The Polk County Master Gardeners conduct soil pH tests every Thursday from 9:00 to 12:00 noon for a \$3.00 fee. You may bring the sample in any time during the week and leave it for testing. The results along with any recommendations will be mailed back to you.

We also can send you a soil testing kit which will enable you to take your own soil sample and send it directly to the UF Soil Testing Laboratory. You can have pH run for a \$3.00 fee and/or a test for nutrients including potassium, calcium, magnesium and phosphorous plus the pH for a \$7.00 fee. If phosphorous is adequate or high, use low phosphorous fertilizers - like 15-0-15.

Citrus - Watch your trees for signs of aphids, mealybugs, whiteflies and scales. These insects suck the plant juices and deposit a sticky excreta on the leaves



below. A non-pathogenic fungus called sooty mold grows on this deposit. Sooty mold is not a citrus pathogen, however it makes a black coating on leaves, stems and even fruit. This mold makes the tree look ugly and can be so severe that the leaves are unable to

photosynthesize.

How do you determine the presence of these sucking insects on a citrus tree? Aphids are often present on the undersides of new leaves, and cause the leaves to curl.

Scales are seen as little raised areas on leaves, stems and fruit. The immature scale does not move once it has started to feed on the host. The adult insect and eggs are protected by a shield created by the adult which make them difficult to control. This time of year the eggs hatch and exposed crawlers move out from under the shield to find a new feeding site and are vulnerable to sprays.

Mealybug adults and nymphs, which are mobile, make large masses of cotton-like material in which they live and embed eggs. They can be found on leaves, stems and fruit.

Whiteflies are tiny moth like insects that fly up in clouds when disturbed and feed on leaves stems and fruit. The larvae also live on stems, leaves and fruit and like scales do not move from the original feeding site. Whitefly larvae do not have a protective shield like scales.

Control these sucking insects with horticultural oil and/or insecticidal soap. It may take 2-3 weekly applications to bring these pests under control. The soap and oil will also loosen the sooty mold so that irrigation and rainfall will wash it off the leaves. Keep in mind that these pests are often controlled by beneficial insects.

Have a good gardening day,

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For Polk County Gardening Information and Horticultural Links visit:

<http://polkhort.ifas.ufl.edu>