

Of late, an old maxim comes to mind. “Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me.” Surely, after being tricked once, one should be wary so as not to be tricked again. Did you know Mother Nature is skilled at tricking us humans? In nature, we call this trickery mimicry.

The classic example of animal mimicry is the viceroy butterfly and the monarch butterfly. The viceroy butterfly strongly resembles in color and appearance the monarch. This mimicry protects the viceroy from being eaten by predators—since supposedly monarchs taste bitter.

In the plant world, another superb example of mimicry exists. Every year this mimicry fools many homeowners in Kearney and the surrounding area — at least for the first time. Year after year, homeowners bring me samples of badly damaged spruce and/or juniper foliage and consistently ask, “What is causing the damage and how can I stop it?” Often times, I end up pointing out to them unusual objects attached to the branch that resemble small pine cone-like



structures. After informing them the objects are insect pests and not spruce or juniper cones, they usually comment they have been tricked. Seeing bagworms for the first time and not knowing what they are, I can easily understand how one is fooled into believing they are a part of the tree and not an insect pest. Once I point out to the homeowner they are bagworms, I am reasonably sure they will not be fooled again. Unfortunately, the problem does not end there.

Bagworms are destructive and known to feed on numerous evergreen and deciduous trees and shrubs. Common hosts include spruce, junipers, arborvitae, and willows. If not treated and if not treated at the proper time, bagworms are capable of destroying the tree.

During late summer and into early fall is when most homeowners come to me with their samples and concerns. The reason—by that time of year the bagworms have reached full size and are highly visible. Throughout the growing season, as the worm feeds on the tree's foliage, it spins a cocoon-like bag around itself for protection. The bag's content consists of incorporated dead plant foliage and fibers excreted by the worm. To the untrained eye, the bag is easily mistaken as a part of the tree. Unfortunately, by late summer, using insecticides to kill bagworms has little, if any, effect. The bag fully protects the worm inside. At that time, the only control I recommend is to manually remove the bags from the tree and destroy them. If not, the bags winter over and inside the bags are eggs that will hatch in spring starting a new generation of bagworms.

Late May through June is when bagworm eggs hatch. If one was bothered with bagworms last year, chances are a new brood is about to hatch or has already hatched. Now, is the ideal time to spray for bagworms. Although extremely small and difficult to see, these insect pests are currently vulnerable to an assortment of insecticides. Insecticides capable of destroying young bagworms include Permethrin, Carbaryl, Acephate, Malathion, Deltamethrin and Cyfluthrin. Keep in mind, when using any insecticide always follow the labeled instructions. Also, to protect desirable insects such as bees and other pollinators, avoid spraying on windy days and apply insecticides only near dusk, a time when most pollinators are no longer out and foraging.

We have all heard the saying, "It is not nice to fool Mother Nature", but rarely do we hear the saying, "It is not nice for Mother Nature to fool us." The fact is, through mimicry she does it, but hopefully only once. Shame on her.