

To quote *NET's Backyard Farmer* entomologist, Dr. Fred Baxindale, they are “*Just One of Nature's Pageantry.*” Their occurrence might seem rare to some, but it all depends on what tree you own. Rarely is the condition life-threatening to the tree. However, I can attest to its unpleasant and almost frightening appearance. When first noticed by the owner of the tree, I often receive a call, and this is what I hear, “What alien-like thing is growing on the branches of my ash tree, and how do I get rid of it?”

You may not know this, but ash trees are dioecious. Dioecious means that separate male and female reproductive structures develop only on separate trees. Therefore, ash trees are either male or female.



One easy way to distinguish the difference is to wait until late summer. By then, female ash trees will have produced clusters of seeds called samaras. A samara is a flat, oblong fruiting structure with a seed in one end and when fully ripe, it falls to the ground like a spinning helicopter propeller. Because female ash trees produce many seeds, they can often be somewhat messy in the landscape. Knowing this characteristic, one might think, “It’s better to plant a male ash tree than a female.” Such assessment may have some merit, but, a female tree might be better choice rather than a male, and here is why.

Only male ash trees will experience the alien-like growths I mentioned earlier in this article. The growths are Ash Flower Gall. If one has a male ash tree, expect to find round, green masses (ash flower galls) forming in the male flower clusters during the spring of the year. A little tiny insect called the ash flower mite is the

perpetrator. The mites are microscopic in size and feed on the male flowers of the ash tree. The feeding initiates a chemical reaction. A hormonal response in the tree results in the formation of abnormal growths of its flowers, turning into bright green, ball-like structures called galls. The galls are generally 1/2 to 1 inch in diameter. As the gall masses mature, they darken with age and can persist up to two years.

Interestingly, the female mite causes the harm. It spends the winter under the bud scales or under the bark and in early spring emerges and begins feeding on the flowers of the male ash tree. The female mite then lays eggs in the developing galls. I read that once the gall begins forming, it will continue to grow, even if the mite inside dies. Fortunately, the mite does not kill the host; but unfortunately, these abnormal masses become unsightly and persist often up to two years. Older galls change to a reddish brown in color. Galls formed in previous seasons will remain on the tree even if newly forming galls are prevented.

The ash flower gall is difficult to control. Timing is everything. Apply treatments in early spring. One must kill the mites before galls begin to grow. Look for the first signs of green in the opening flower buds. An application of Sevin® (Carbaryl) in the spring when the first blossoms begin to form will reduce the number of galls. However, larger trees are difficult to treat, and because ash flower gall is considered a cosmetic problem, treatment is rarely suggested. Young male ash trees differ in their susceptibility. Consider replacing highly susceptible trees. I do know that once a tree has experienced ash flower galls, the problem is likely to reoccur.

By now, if one is seeing ash flower gall in his or her male ash tree, one must realize that treatment for this year is of no avail. Knowing this, I suggest viewing them as Dr. Fred Baxindale would: *Just One of Nature's Pageantry!*