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Insects Bugging Us Now

By: Kelly Feehan, Extension

Release: Week of October 4, 2021

Fall armyworm munching lawns, large cedar beetles crawling on ash trees and minute pirate bugs biting us. These are a few things that can make us thankful for the first hard freeze.

Fall armyworms are damaging lawns in Columbus. If the larvae (caterpillars) are not fully grown, they can be controlled. Once mature or pupated, there is no effective treatment for them. This insect moves north from southern states and will not survive our winters.

Caterpillars are greenish brown with a broad, pale band across the tops of their bodies and dark stripes on their sides; growing up to one and one-fourth inches long. Called armyworm because they move in large groups causing damage in a line across the lawn.

Monitor lawns for caterpillars and damage. If found and identified as fall armyworm, small caterpillars can be treated with organic products containing Spinosad or *Bacillus thuringiensis kurstaki* (Btk). Caterpillars less than three-fourths inches long are treated with pyrethroids like bifenthrin or carbaryl.

Adults are nocturnal, dark gray-brown, mottled moths. Eggs are laid in a mass that is tan and covered in fluffy scales. Destroy eggs masses by hand when found on hardscape like patio furniture and fences.

Damaged turfgrass can recover with fall irrigation and fertilization if plant crowns are not killed. Areas that do not recover this fall can be seeded this winter (dormant seeding) or early next spring.

Cedar beetles, also known as cicada parasite beetles, have been found on the trunks of ash, elm and other trees. Cedar beetles are harmless, but tree owners may be concerned they are emerald ash borer.

Emerald ash borers emerge in May and are bright green in color. They are small enough, they can easily fit on a penny. Cedar beetles are three-fourths to one inch long and dark gray or black. Males have comb-like antennae that spread out like a fan and beetles may be orange-brown in color.

Cedar beetles crawl on tree trunks in September and October laying eggs in bark cracks. Upon hatching, larvae drop to the ground and pupate. They feed on cicada nymphs under the ground. This insect is not harmful to trees. If you see damage to the trunk, it was caused by something else like woodpeckers.

Emerald ash borer was confirmed in Columbus this summer. Now is the time to evaluate ash trees to determine if they are good candidates for treatment. If so, treatment needs to begin in spring. Fall treatments are not effective.

Minute pirate bugs are very tiny, black insects with a painful bite. Pirate bugs are beneficial predators of plant pests like thrips, mites, and aphids. When they happen to land on people, they probe us with short, blunt beaks.

People sensitive to the bites end up with itchy, welts. While bites are painful and irritating, pirate bugs do not feed on blood, inject venom, or transmit diseases so they are otherwise harmless.

Insect repellents are not effective against pirate bugs. Applying baby oil to skin might make the bugs less likely to bite if they become stuck in the oil. Wearing dark colored, long sleeved clothing when outdoors can minimize pirate bug bites.

Avoid applying an insecticide in the landscape for pirate bugs. Insecticides are not effective but will harm beneficial insects and pollinators. Be patient until the weather turns colder and pirate bugs and fall armyworms will cease to be a problem.

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