Yard and Garden – 06-27-09 – Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

They're back and this time in great numbers! What are they? My office has been inundated with samples of these peculiarities. I'm always amazed when people bring me these creatures for identification that some have never noticed them before. I'm of the opinion that if one owns a silver maple tree; the tree is either currently infested or has been infested with these critters in years prior. However, for whatever reason, this year they seem to be more noticeable. While such a phenomena is disconcerting, and although I've written about them before; today, I again choose to place them in the spotlight.

The first question I'm asked is, "What are they, and will they harm my tree?" Secondly, "What can I do to get rid of them?"

I appreciate people's concerns. Although their ominous appearance conjures up all kinds of fears in the minds of those who see them for the first time, I'm pleased to announce that they are relatively harmless to their host. At most, they are ugly and unsightly. A few weeks ago, on ETV's *Backyard Farmer*, panelist and entomologist, Dr. Fred Baxendale referred to them as one of the many wonders in nature's pageantry. I simply call them a curiosity of nature.

To what do we owe this ruckus? The answer is maple bladder gall.

Maple bladder gall is a common leaf gall found on the upper surface of the foliage of most silver maples and some red maple trees. They appear as rounded or elongated pouches approximately 1/8 inch in size. At first the galls are light green in color, but they quickly turn bright red and finally black by the end of summer.

The galls are caused by a small insect mite called *Vasates quadripedes*. The adult mites spend their winter under the bark of the tree. In early spring they move to the developing new leaves to begin feeding. The leaf responds to the small irritating bite by rapidly producing extra cells that form the abnormal growth. This growth is called the gall. Interestingly, the gall encloses the mite which continues to feed and lay numerous eggs. Mites undergo prolific reproduction, and when the eggs hatch, new mites move to other leaves to repeat the process. This activity continues until mid-summer when it

begins to decline. In the fall, adult mites leave the foliage and return to the bark to overwinter.

Although their appearance is unsightly; as stated before, their effect on the tree is of little significance. With heavy infestations, leaves may become disfigured and may drop prematurely.

It is important to know that galls cannot be removed after they have formed. No insecticides will improve the condition of the tree or eliminate the galls. Preventive measures are the only treatment. Such treatments must be applied in early spring at the time of bud break to prevent the formation of galls. Repeated applications must be applied at regular intervals throughout the first half of the summer; however, such activity usually has minimal effectiveness. Furthermore, to use large quantities of pesticide with little return is rarely, if ever, justified.

It is true, maple bladder galls are back. If the leaves of your maple tree are covered with these strange anomalies my only advice is, “Ignore them!” After all, they are just one of nature’s curiosities.