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CHRISTMAS IN JULY???

Are you noticing brown “Christmas ornaments” on your trees that aren’t supposed to be there? It’s not Christmas in July, you’ve got bagworms, and now’s the time to do something about them, before it’s too late.

The bagworm is native to North America and is a major pest of trees and shrubs. They are not only unsightly, but the larva (or caterpillar) causes damage by feeding on the leaves of trees. Bagworms are most commonly seen on conifers such as arborvitae, bald cypress, cedar, fir, juniper, pine or spruce; but they can also feed on broadleaf deciduous trees and shrubs.

Bagworms begin their lives as eggs laid inside the female’s pupal case located inside the bag. The caterpillars typically emerge from the bags in mid-May through June, but cooler temperatures may delay egg hatch and activity. The larvae produce fine strands of silk for wind dispersal to nearby plants when they are about 1/8 to 1/4 inch in length. Larvae may also transfer to other plants when plants are touching.

Once larvae find a host plant, they settle and begin feeding. They have chewing mouthparts which can damage the aesthetic quality of trees and shrubs, and may cause complete defoliation. During the feeding process, they construct silken bags that are covered with twigs and foliage from the plant (the ‘ornaments you see on your tree or shrub). These bags protect the larvae from predators, such as birds and the larvae remain in the bags while they continue to feed. As they grow, they feed more intensively and progressively do more damage to the host plant. If not managed, excessive bagworm populations can defoliate trees and shrubs.

Management of bagworms may be handled with cultural practices or insecticides. Minor bagworm infestations can be hand-picked off the trees during the growing season and winter. Be sure to thoroughly check the canopy of the tree to pick all bags as overlooking one female bagworm can result in 500-1,000 bagworm larvae the next spring. After removing the bags, soak them in a bucket of soapy water for 15 minutes. Then, empty the bags in pile where they’ll receive full sun. Don’t place the bags in garbage containers, compost piles, or leave them on the ground. When managing with an insecticide, apply one containing the active ingredients Bacillus thuringiensis or spinosad to small larvae, 1/8 to 1/4 inch long weekly, for four weeks. Not all larvae emerge at the same time, so progressive applications will ensure that all larvae are affected. The recommended insecticide is a stomach poison to the caterpillar that small larvae must ingest to be affected. Once bagworms reach a length of 1-2 inches, they are more difficult to control with pesticides because as they mature, feeding declines and pesticide exposure decreases.

To learn more about controlling pests in the garden or landscape, contact the Cowley County Extension Office at 620-221-5450 or email Kelsey Nordyke (klnordyke@ksu.edu).

Original Source: Raymond A. Cloyd, Horticultural Entomology and Plant Protection Specialist, KSRE publication MF3474, “Bagworm: Insect Pest of Trees and Shrubs”.

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