KILLER SCALE ATTACKS SAGO PALMS

Although cooler weather has arrived, that is not snow you may be seeing on your sago palms. Take a closer look. Those small white flecks are actually insects called cycad aulacaspis scale (Aulacaspis yasumatsui), also known as Asian cycad scale. The scale, accidentally introduced to the United States from Thailand, was discovered in Miami in 1996. Unfortunately, it has been spreading throughout Florida ever since. If untreated, the pest will kill your plants.

Asian cycad scale is an invasive exotic pest, which attacks members of the cycad family by sucking the juices out of the plants' leaves. The scale is 'exotic' because it is not native to Florida and is not controlled by natural predators. Without them, the scale reproduces rapidly, causing it to become "invasive."

Scale insects begin their lives in a "crawler" stage, in which they crawl around the plant until they find a suitable spot to feed. They insert their stylet into the plant and begin feeding. Soon afterwards, they create a protective covering over themselves where they will remain stationary until they die.

Asian cycad scale comes in two shapes and sizes. If you look closely at an infested sago palm, you will see the differences. The males are narrow, rod-shaped and smaller. The females are round, moundshaped and much larger.

This species of scale can be harder to control than other scale species because of its unique characteristics. It is unusual in that it can infest the roots of the plants as well as the leaves and stems. "Crawlers" have been found anywhere from between 6 and 24 inches below the soil surface. Asian cycad scale also can be easily spread by wind.

The most effective control for the Asian cycad scale is to use a horticultural oil spray or Malathion-in-oil spray, available at garden centers. Cycads should be treated with the oil very other week until the pest is eradicated. It is important to spray the plant thoroughly, including the underside of the leaves. Any gaps in coverage will allow the scale population to rebound. Follow directions on the insecticide label.

It is possible, however, to have killed the scale and for it to remain on the plant. Strong streams of water from your garden hose will loosen the dead scale and wash them off. It may take a number of applications to control the pest. The most important thing to remember is to treat affected plants in a consistent and effective manner.

In severe cases, you may use a systemic insecticide, which is used as a soil drench and taken through the "system" of the plant via the roots. The insecticide will affect the insects when they feed on the plant. Systemics also interfere with beneficial insects, therefore, they should only be used on a limited basis.

Because of the time and cost involved in eliminating this devastating pest, one needs to consider if all the work is worth it. It may be easier and more cost effective to remove the sago palm and plant something else not affected by the scale. Larger sago palms are probably worth the effort. But remember, if you eliminate the scale and your neighbors do not, watch out for a reinfection. Monthly preventive treatments should keep your sago palms safe, but there are no guarantees.

Researchers at the U.S. Department of Agriculture are searching for a natural predator for Asian cycad scale. But for now we have to do the work ourselves.

For information, contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners. They are available to take your calls on Monday to Friday from 10am to 2pm. They also invite you to stop by and visit their new plant clinic. The Osceola County Extension office is in the new Osceola Heritage Park complex, behind the old Kissimmee Valley Agricultural Center.