HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

CYCAD AULACASPIS SCALE

The battle continues.

The Cycad Aulacaspis Scale, also known as Asian Cycad Scale, that invaded our sago palms last year is still fighting this fall.

You will recognize the insects as small white flecks on the upper and lower leaves of the sago palms. They are very difficult to control and have the capability of killing a medium-sized sago within months.

The Asian Cycad Scale comes in two different shapes and sizes. If you look closely at your infested sago palm, you will see the differences. The males are narrow, rodshaped and smaller. The females are round, mound-shaped and much larger.

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 then insert their stylet (much like a straw) into the plant and begin feeding. Soon afterward, they create a protective covering over themselves where they will remain stationary until they die.

This species of scale can be very difficult to control due to its rare 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 between 6 to 24 inches below the soil surface. The Asian Cycad Scale can also be easily spread by wind, and it reproduces at an alarming rate.

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 every other week until the pest is eradicated. It is very important to spray the plant thoroughly, including the underside of the leaves. Any gaps in the 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 scales and wash them off. It may take a number of applications to control the pest. The most important thing to remember when controlling this pest is to treat it 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 and should only be used on a limited basis.

Because of the time and cost that can be involved in eliminating this devastating pest, one needs to consider if all the work is really worth it. It may be easier and more cost effective to remove the sago palm and plant something else that is not affected by the Asian Cycad Scale.

Larger sago palms may be worth the effort. But remember if you work to eliminate the scale and your neighbors do not, watch out for a re-infestation.

For information on the Asian Cycad Scale or other plant related questions, call Osceola County master gardeners, who are available to take calls Monday to Friday from 10am to 2pm. The phone number is 321-697-3000.

Master gardeners will have a plant sale and garden school from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Oct. 25 at Osceola Heritage Park.
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