HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

ASIAN CYCAD SCALE

For the fourth year in a row, the Asian cycad scale (Aulacapis yasumatsui) is attacking the sago palms (Cycas revolute) of Central Florida in great numbers. It may resemble snowflakes settling on the fronds.

The Asian cycad scale is a small, white, stationary insect that sucks the juices out of the plant, causing discoloration of leaves, growth of sooty mold and eventually death of the sago, if not treated.

This particular scale insect, introduced to the United States from Thailand, was discovered in Miami in 1996. Since then, it has been spreading throughout Florida.

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 afterward, they create a protective covering over themselves, where they will remain until they die. The males are narrow, rod-shaped and smaller. The females are larger, round, and mound-shaped.

This species of scale can be harder to control than others. It can infest the roots as well as the leaves and stems. "Crawlers" have been found as much as 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 (ultrafine, summer oil, volek oil, dormant oil, etc.) spray or Malathion-in-oil spray, available at garden centers. Cycads should be treated with the oil every other week until it 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.

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. It may take a number of applications to control the pest. The most important thing to remember is to treat affected plants consistently and effectively.

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. Systemic insecticides, such as those with the active ingredients acephate, dimethoate and disyston, move into the sap system. The insects are then poisoned when they feed on the sap of 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 replant some, thing else that has a similar look but is not affected by the scale. These plants can include cardboard palms (Zamia furfuracea) or pygmy date palms (Phoenix roebelenii). Larger sago palms are probably worth the effort. But if you eliminate the scale and your neighbors do not, watch out for a reinfestation. Monthly preventive oil treatments should keep your sagos 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 more information, call the Osceola County Master Gardeners at 321-697-3000. They are available to take your calls Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

For better gardening

Interested in learning more about gardening in Florida? The Great Gardener Program begins Oct. 11th. Call 321-697-3000 for more information.