HORTICULTURE COLUMN

AZALEA PESTS

Hot steamy weather is tough on us and it is tough on many plants. Bugs seem to love it. Lacebugs and caterpillars are causing problems on azaleas this time of year.

Azalea caterpillars are first noticed when leaves look like Swiss cheese or are missing entirely. Look closely and you will probably find the culprits in large groups. They have dark red heads and lengthwise yellow stripes on their bodies.

When disturbed, they do the cheerleader imitation as if saying "give me a ‘c’" for caterpillar. You will find them curled in a c shape along the plant stems. They grow to 2½" long before dropping to the soil to pupate.

The pupa or cocoon is a resting stage; they do not eat. Next summer they emerge as moths. The adult moth is about 1" long and brown. The female lays eggs which then hatch into the tiny caterpillars and start the cycle all over again.

When the eggs hatch, you can find the small rice-size caterpillars clustered in the shoots, munching away. Caterpillars are chewing pest so the damage they cause is missing plant parts. Tiny caterpillars cannot chew through the whole leaf but they can scrape part of the top of the leaf off. The remaining thin transparent film of tissue looks like a window pane and is typical for young caterpillar damage.

Moths don’t eat the leaves, only the caterpillars. This one prefers azaleas but may nibble on other nearby shrubs.

Control measures are simple but you must catch them early before they feast too much. When you find where they are chewing, hand pick them or trim the branch and throw the caterpillars away. New leaves will not grow back until next spring so twigs stripped of leaves will remain bare until next year. Remove the damaged branches and it won’t be so obvious that you have provided lunch.

If your planting is too large, and you find the caterpillars when they are small, use Bacillus thuringiensis. It is a naturally occurring bacteria approved for use on many plants and only kills caterpillars. Use caution with this product since it doesn’t discriminate and will also kill caterpillars of beautiful butterflies. Other insecticides are also approved but avoid dust formulations that are especially toxic to bees.

Lacebugs are another summer pest of azaleas. Don’t confuse these with beneficial lacewings. They are different creatures. Lacebug damage is recognized as a stippled, silvery appearance of the leaves. Lacebugs have a straw-like mouth. The symptoms are caused by the insects piercing-sucking type of feeding on the undersides of leaves. It looks like a snow cone when you have sipped the juice out of a straw. The juice is gone and the white ice remains.

Adults are 1/8" to 1/4" long and have brown/black bodies with transparent, lacy wings held flat on the back. Immature lacebugs lack wings but are covered with spines. Eggs are inserted into the undersides of leaves. Shiny black eggs or fecal spots are often observed on leaf undersides.

The azalea lacebug is host specific and will not feed on other plants. There are three to five generations each year beginning in the spring. Begin watching for lacebugs on new growth after flowers fall. Full-sun locations are often the most severely damaged.

Monitor lacebug populations and apply an approved insecticide when needed. Even if you spray to kill them, the damage will remain until new growth forms and old damaged leaves die and fall off. Repeat
Systemic fertilizer/pesticide combinations may provide some relief (no pun intended) on next year’s growth. Roots absorb fertilizer and the chemicals poisoning the plant sap. Insects die when they feed on the poisoned sap.

If you want to learn more about gardening and landscape care, contact the Osceola County Extension Service at (321) 697-3000. Master Gardener volunteers are available on Mondays to Fridays from 10 am to 2 pm to help diagnose plant problems.

Master Gardener classes begin in September. Volunteers attend about 60 hours of training on many aspects of Central Florida plant care and agree to provide 50 hours of service to the community in return. Call (321) 697-3000 and request a "Sprouting Kit" application packet.

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