

While You were Cooling It - Bagworms in the Landscape

All of our high hopes for a return to a normal summer weather pattern, whatever that is, have vanished. Three weeks ago, lawns and pastures were green. Many of us now have given up to wait inside for a cooler, wetter fall gardening experience. But like the last few summers, bagworms won't be taking a break. When you go back outside in September to find your junipers, cedars, Leyland cypress and other evergreen trees and shrubs brown and covered with small Christmas ornament-like brown bags hanging from twigs and limbs, my phone will start to light up. If you've had a problem before, you might want to do a little scouting and make some insecticide applications now. It'll be too late in just a few weeks.

Bagworms are caterpillars that make distinctive spindle-shaped bags on a variety of trees and shrubs throughout Georgia. They attack both deciduous trees and evergreens but are especially damaging to juniper, arborvitae, spruce, pine and cedar. Large populations of bagworms can strip plants of their foliage and eventually cause them to die. Infestations often go unnoticed because people mistake the protective bags for pine cones or other plant structures.

Bagworms are the larval (caterpillar) stage of a moth that is rarely seen. Only the males develop into typical moths capable of flight. The adult female is grub-like and remains inside the bag until just before she dies.

Bagworms pass the winter as eggs inside the bag that contained the previous year's female. In mid to late May the eggs hatch, and the tiny larvae crawl out from the end of the bag in search of food. By using silk and bits of plant material, they soon construct a small bag around their hind part that looks like a tiny, upright ice cream cone. As the larvae continue to feed and grow, they enlarge the bag enabling them to withdraw into it when disturbed. Older larvae strip evergreens of their needles and consume whole leaves of susceptible deciduous species, leaving only the larger veins. The bag is ornamented with bits of whatever type of vegetation they are feeding upon.

By early fall, the bags reach their maximum size of 1 ½ to 2 inches. At this time the larvae permanently suspend their bags from twigs, and transform into the pupa or resting stage before becoming an adult.

Bagworms have two means of dispersing from plant to plant. Very young larvae may spin strands of silk and be carried fairly long distances by wind. Larger larvae may move short distances by crawling.

If only a few small trees or shrubs are infested, picking the bags off by hand and disposing of them may afford satisfactory control. This approach is most effective during fall, winter or early spring before the eggs have hatched.

Insecticides are more effective when the crawling larvae are small. For Georgia, the best time to look for and control feeding larvae is late May through June. Carefully inspect

susceptible landscape plants, especially evergreens, for last year's bags. Young bagworms are harder to see; look closely for the small, upright bags which have the appearance of tiny ice cream cones constructed of bits of plant material. Preventive treatment is often justified on plants that were heavily infested with bagworms the previous year.

Several products are available for homeowner and professional use. For homeowners, malathion or the microbial insecticide *Bacillus thuringiensis* are labeled as well as several of the pyrethroids that are sold under many trade names.

With this year's high temperatures and low moisture, any insect that feeds by sucking plant juices are looking for nourishment any place they can find it which is probably in your garden. So before you go totally into summer hibernation, check for bagworms and treat now if needed. When you find the little bags hanging in September, cutting them off by hand will be your only choice – if it's not too late.