

Pine Bark Beetles

Have you ever noticed a dead pine tree in your yard or alongside the road that was surrounded by healthy pine trees. You may wonder why that one tree died and all the others are healthy.

Pine trees are commonly infected by pine bark beetles which can attack and kill weakened pine trees. Lightening strikes, drought, mechanical wounds, and pruning are things that can make pines more prone to attacks.

The two main types of pine beetles in our area are the Black Turpentine Beetle (BTB) and the Ips beetles. The BTB is the larger of the two beetles, but that doesn't mean they are large.

The BTB is about ¼ of an inch long and usually attacks the tree from zero to eight feet high. These beetles usually do not kill the tree, but they can weaken it and encourage other beetles to attack the tree.

The BTB and the Ips beetles bore into the tree just underneath the bark and excavate tunnels in which they lay their eggs. When the larvae mature, the beetles emerge which causes small shot holes on the surface of the tree.

Ips beetles attack anywhere on the tree. They carry spores of the "blue stain" fungus which infects the vascular system of the pine tree. Once the fungus enters the tree it prevents water flow to the top and the tree causing the tree to turn brown and die.

The BTB does not carry the blue stain fungus. For this reason pine trees can survive attacks from this beetle. If their numbers are great they can girdle the tree and kill it. Attacks from the BTB also encourage invasions of Ips beetles.

Most pine beetle infestations are usually discovered when the tree begins to turn brown at the top. At this point the tree cannot be saved and most of the beetle larvae have matured and left the tree.

An earlier sign of pine beetle activity is pine sap oozing from the bark. This sap forms a mound of sap on the bark that is called a pitch tube. When beetles bore into the tree, the tree will produce sap to in an attempt to remove the beetle. Some trees can successfully push beetles out before they infect the tree.

Weakened trees often do not have enough sap to extract the beetles. If pitch tubes are smaller than a dime they are probably caused by Ips beetles. If they are larger than a dime it is most likely the BTB.

Other signs of pine beetles are small larvae underneath the bark, and the presence of galleries under the bark. Galleries look like tiny trails. This indicates the presence of beetles. Many dead pines have a lot of saw dust at the base of the tree. This is caused by other beetles entering the pine after the initial pine beetle infestation.

If you have infected trees, the best means of control is to remove the trees to prevent further spread of beetles. Chemical control is usually not feasible for Ips beetles. Pyrethroids applied to the trunk will help prevent new infestations of the BTB.

To prevent beetles from attacking your pines keep them as healthy as possible. Pruning should be done in the winter. Avoid injury to your pines and keep them watered during extended dryness. For more information on bark beetles refer to the following address, <http://www.barkbeetles.org/southernbarkbeetles.cfm>