

Landscape Pests

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Moving into the winter gardening season, we have a whole new set of pests to deal with.

It is time to plant the broccoli, cauliflower, and other cabbage related transplants in the raised bed garden. If you have planted transplants you have probably already experienced cabbage loopers. They are the green caterpillars that eat the foliage of the plants. Recognize their presence by holes in the foliage. Move quickly to apply a Bt product such as Thuricide, Bio-Worm Killer, or Dipel to the foliage. If you wait too long the caterpillars will quickly strip a small transplant.

Bt is a derivative of a bacteria that when consumed by a feeding caterpillar it stops the feeding and the worm dies.

There is a second caterpillar working on the transplants as well. Cut worms emerge from the ground and feed on the small plants. The smaller transplants such as those in 1.5-inch peat pots are especially vulnerable to cut worms. They will eat foliage of standing plants, but the most common damage is to cut down the plant at its base. Foliage feeding cut worms will succumb to Bt, but I have achieved more reliable control by spraying the soil and transplant base with malathion.

Another caterpillar is feeding on your Texas mountain laurel. I have always called it a Sophora caterpillar because I can't remember its real name. The Sophora caterpillar eats the foliage on the ends of the stems. On a large mature plant, the damage is not a problem but on young or stressed plants the caterpillars should be controlled with a Bt product.

It bothers me a bit to be recommending the use of pesticides to control caterpillars and other insects when we are in the midst of the fall migratory visits by Monarch butterflies and there is so much activity by swallowtails, queens, gulf fritillaries and other species. It is, of course, best for the butterflies if we don't spray any insecticides but if we are careful and target our sprays, damage to desirable butterflies is minimal.

Controlling mosquitoes is especially challenging in terms of its effect on butterflies. To protect humans from diseases carried by mosquitoes, control of the insects is often essential. Perform other control activities, such as eliminating the standing water first, and then limit spraying to wet thick foliage or other places where there is evidence of sheltering mosquitoes. If you have an expectant mother or young children in the household, it may be best to confer with a pest control firm with a reputation for environmental awareness and come up with an effective and environmentally appropriate spray program.

The rain has stimulated the growth of lush weeds everywhere, which will increase the number of slugs and snails. They will feed on zinnias, primula, cole crops and other plants in the winter garden. Control them by applying a slug and snail bait around the garden areas. Beer traps are a second option. Sink a plastic cup every 2 feet in the garden so that its lip is at ground level. Half-fill the cup with beer and the slugs, snails, and pill bugs will fill the cup up. The pests are not fussy about the brand of the beer and they will even respond to stale beer. When the cup is full of dead slugs and snails, empty them out and refill the cup.

There have been numerous reports of scale and mealy bugs on citrus, peaches, euonymus and even hollies. The insects suck the juices from the host plant. Scale are protected by a calcium coating and their mealy bug cousins have a white fluffy covering that makes the pests tough to control. A few scale or mealy bugs will not generally be a major problem for the host plant but if they become thick on the stems and trunks, they can deplete the plants nutrients and cause decline.

The usual way to control scale and mealy bugs is to apply dormant oil. The treatment eventually suffocates the insects. Apply the oil in a summer mix for evergreen plants. Follow label instructions. It also helps to scrape some of the scale and mealy bugs off the infected plant.

If you want more information about attracting birds and butterflies to your landscape, there are two free programs that you may want to attend. On the evening of October 2, at 5-6:30PM, Mark Prange at 5007 East Beverly Mae in Dreamhill Estates near Medical Center is hosting a tour of his Butterfly Garden. I will be available to help answer any questions that visitors have about the Garden and the butterflies that it attracts. On Saturday Oct 6 at 9:30 AM I will be making a presentation at Birds Unlimited at 14602 Huebner Rd. in the Olmos Creek Shopping Center on "Gardening to Attract Birds and Butterflies".