

Bag 'em, or they'll eat your tree

County seeing increase in problems with bag worms

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FREEHOLD BUREAU

They are creepy and crawly and tend to hang around.

And bag worms just love to devour your ornamental arborvitae, spruce or juniper.



"It's been picking up the last couple of years," said Jim Lashomb, a Rutgers University insect expert, speaking of the infestation cycle. "It's probably still going up, (but) I can't tell for sure."

Based on inquiries to the Monmouth County Agricultural Agent's office, the local increase in bag worms began about two years ago, affecting trees in areas such as Upper Freehold, Freehold Township and Millstone Township, said Richard G. Obal, one of the county's agents.

"That's one of the most frequently encountered insect pests in the state," Lashomb said.

Bag worms, depending on gender and where they are in their life cycle, can appear either as male moths, caterpillars attached to protective bags, bag-encased female moths or bags filled with hundreds of eggs.

This time of year, bag worms are easy to spot: 2-inch-long egg-filled bags, resembling small pine cones, that hang from tree and shrub branches.

"Their favorite trees are arborvitae; spruces, especially blue spruce, and juniper," Obal said. "You'll sometimes see them in deciduous trees, but they're not as damaging. Evergreens are definitely preferred."

Bob Arcoleo, owner of Ocean Wholesale Nursery in Jackson, however, said "I've seen more on deciduous trees than I used to."

About three years ago, Millstone Township resident Marybeth Pascale bought 18 arborvitae for her house.

"All of a sudden, one got it," said Pascale, 53, speaking of a tree infested by bag worms. "It went down the line like no tomorrow."

Pascale did not catch the bag worm infestation in time, losing all 18 trees.

The local increase in bag worms, a native species, is likely part of a natural cycle — the bag worm population is flourishing until its natural predator, a parasitic wasp, brings it under control, Obal said.

"Mother Nature'll take care of it on its own," Obal said. "But they are easy to control (in the meantime)."

Last month, Obal, at the request of the Millstone Township Shade Tree Commission, addressed the Township Committee on controlling bag worms.

Controlling them now is easy because they are in the bag state after overwintering, Obal said, and advised, "Hand-pick the bags before they hatch out."

Then, take the bags and place them in soapy water, drowning the insect, according to Obal. Do not throw the bags on the ground because the caterpillar can then crawl to a tree, Obal said.

"Early on, you can pick them off," Lashomb said. "(But), sometimes, it's too numerous."

Millstone Township Mayor Nancy Grbelja had them on her property.

"I don't have a large infestation, but maybe 10 bags on a little (arborvitae) bush," Grbelja said. "Other trees, nothing. I took them off and destroyed them."

Later in the year, spraying becomes the method of attacking bag worms. About mid-June, when bag worms hatch into a tiny caterpillar, is the time to spray, said Obal and Lashomb.

"When the mountain laurel blooms, that's the time to spray (the trees being attacked by bag worms)," said Obal, throwing out homespun gardening advice. "That (mountain laurel blooming) coincides pretty much with the time bag worm eggs hatch out."

Obal recommended spraying twice with *Bacillus thuringiensis*, or BT, the same bacterium commonly used to fight gypsy moths.

Grbelja said she also may spray for the bag worms in June.

Wind can blow the tiny caterpillars to other trees — "People could say, 'I had no bags and I'm seeing defoliation,'" Obal said.

While spraying is an option, "it's really hard to spray them because there's only a small time the spray is effective," said Arcoleo, explaining why pulling them off and destroying them is preferable.

The key to the pull-and-destroy method is catching bag worms before they are widespread.

"Timing is the key," Obal said. "Once they (the caterpillars) are large and constructing their bag, they are hard to control."

Caterpillars with the obvious protective bag attached are eating the tree, Obal said. They will feed to about mid-August, Obal said.

Later, male bag worms become moths, breeding with the females in October, Obal said.

Then, bag worms overwinter as eggs in the bags to repeat the cycle in the spring, Obal said.

Joseph C. Goffreda, a member of the Millstone Township Shade Tree Commission, said he began hearing of residents raising bag worm concerns last year. The commission began advising residents how to control bag worms, Goffreda said.

"The outbreak is pretty widespread," said Goffreda, adding bag worms are on trees at Rutgers University's Tree Fruit Research & Extension Center, the Upper Freehold facility he directs.

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