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## Sago palm infestation could be on rebound

November 12, 2005



Asian Cycad Scale has been a serious problem on sago palms in local landscapes for several years in the Corpus Christi area. In September 2004, we began a massive information campaign to identify the distribution of the insect in the Coastal Bend and to control its spread. Some gardeners easily recognized the presence on sago palms where large numbers of scale resemble Christmas tree flocking.

Gardeners reported the heaviest infestations in the Padre Island area and in Southside neighborhoods bordered by South Padre Island Drive, Kostoryz, Saratoga and Airline. Less concentrated cases were reported in Central Corpus Christi and a couple of cases also have been reported in Port Aransas, Taft and Rockport.

Statewide, the infestation reaches farther than first suspected with reports from Houston and Tyler. Severe infestations have been reported in the Rio Grande Valley, particularly in South Padre Island and Brownsville.

### Ask the Garden Pro

Q. My oak trees are being attacked by some kind of worm that's eating the leaves. What is it and what do I need to do?

A. The annual outbreak of yellow-necked caterpillars seems to be later than usual this year. These caterpillars have a solid black head and a distinctive yellow-orange band immediately behind it. They also have long thin pale yellow stripes running the length of their backs. These pests are voracious eaters and will strip an oak tree within a few days. They often are seen in clusters along the tree trunk or on large limbs.

If you catch the problem early while the caterpillars are small, you can use a product with *Bacillus thuringiensis* (commonly called B.t.) found in products like Thuricide, Dipel and BioWorm Killer. If you see larger caterpillars or if the infestation has shown significant defoliation of your tree, you might want to try a contact insecticide like Malathion or carbaryl (Sevin) for faster and more complete kill. Although your oak tree may look a little sparse, don't worry. If it is healthy, new leaves will grow, but you probably won't see them until spring because they were stripped so late in the year.

Send questions to Michael Womack at [wm-womack@tamu.edu](mailto:wm-womack@tamu.edu) or Ask the Garden Pro, 710 East Main St., Suite 1, Robstown, 78380.

### On the rebound

Local observations through the past year showed a decline in damage. Initial treatments with horticultural oil and/or Malathion appeared to be getting this pest under control. In recent weeks, however, Asian Cycad Scale populations appear to be on the rebound.

Asian Cycad Scale also known as the Cycad Aulacaspis Scale (*Aulacaspis yasumatsui*) reproduces extremely quickly. A couple of months without control measures can result in the flocked look on your sago. Increased sightings in recent weeks probably are because homeowners discontinued chemical treatments once the plants appeared to be healthy.

Asian Cycad Scale entered the United States through Florida in 1996 and rapidly moved throughout that state. It is one of the few major pests known to affect sago palms and other cycads. Although some other scale insects be found on sagos, they usually do little harm and can be treated easily using a horticultural oil or a systemic insecticide. Unfortunately, Asian Cycad Scale is more persistent, multiplying until they literally suck the life out of the sago palm. If left untreated, an infected sago palm can die in three to six months.

### Crawler stage

When the insects hatch, they are mobile in the initial crawler stage. Once they find a suitable location on the plant, they insert their stylet, a straw-like mouth part, into the leaf and start sucking. Shortly afterward, they produce a waxy white coating over themselves and stay there until they reproduce and die.

As many as 3,000 insects per square inch have been seen in heavy infestations, producing the dense white flocked appearance. Infestations usually begin on the underside of leaves and then move to the upper side and stems. A medium-sized sago can be completely coated with scale within a couple of months.

One of the biggest problems with Asian Cycad Scale is rapid spreading. Prolific reproduction results in large numbers of immature crawlers that can be moved by touching or working with infected plants followed by healthy plants.

Landscape maintenance probably is the main way it is being spread locally. If a home gardener or a lawn service trims an infected sago palm and then moves to healthy palm without cleaning the clippers, they can spread it. Clippers always should be disinfected in a 10 percent bleach solution before they are used on another plant.

Asian Cycad Scale also can be carried on gloves, clothing, and even unsuspecting lawnmowers that simply brush against an infected plant. Don't forget about dogs and cats either; these domestic animals can move the insects from plant to plant by brushing against an infected plant and then moving to a clean plant. Plant material also can blow in the wind and land on a healthy plant to start a new colony.

The most effective treatment now appears to be a combination of a systemic and the contact insecticides according to research from the University of Florida. Imidicloprid, the active ingredient in many of the Bayer systemic insecticides, should be applied before a flush of growth so that the plant will take it up into new fronds.

Combining imidicloprid applications that with bi-weekly spraying of a lightweight horticultural oil will help to knock the current population down and provide long-term protection against new crawlers that hatch after the oil spray. Remember that good coverage on both the top and underside of leaves is important as well as spraying the trunk for good control with oil.

Simply removing the white fronds usually doesn't provide control because the crawlers also are found on the roots and will quickly result in re-infestation. Frond removal is not recommended except on severe infestations. Afterward, make sure your clippers are soaked for 10 minutes in a 10 percent bleach

solution. Heavily infested fronds can be removed, bagged and sent to the landfill to reduce the numbers, but chemical control is also needed on the infected plants.

It also appears that keeping a strong pest management regiment with both systemic and contact insecticides for 18-24 months or even longer may be needed to control this pest.

Michael Womack is a horticulturist with Texas Cooperative Extension in Nueces County.

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