

Time To Spray for Bagworms

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

If you have juniper shrubs (some call them cedars - they are the same thing) around your home then there's a good chance you have dealt with bagworms before. While they are easily controlled, you need to be aware of the risk and their presence so you can get on them when they are small and easily dealt with or you could risk seeing severe feeding damage on bushes.

Bagworms are the larval form of a nondescript little moth. In fact the female bagworm is flightless. Adults do no damage, but the larvae will feed on over 200 species of trees and shrubs. They prefer junipers/cedars but can live on many other species of woody plants. When bagworms defoliate a rose bush, a pyracantha shrub, or any other deciduous species, the plant just activates dormant buds and produces new leaves. Unfortunately junipers don't have that ability. All the new growth occurs from the tips of the foliage and it generally only happens once per year. So severe defoliation of a juniper by bagworms can be the death knell for that plant.

Bagworms started hatching a week or so ago and will be hatching for another ten days or so. As soon as they hatch, the small larvae start feeding on the host plant and create a little case or bag that they decorate, or camouflage if you will, with small pieces of foliage from the host plant. Early in the season these larvae and their bags are quite small, no more than 3/8 of an inch long. Later on in the summer those bags will be 1½ to 2 inches long and easily seen. But right now, when they will be much easier to kill, they are easily overlooked.

If you had bagworms on your junipers last year, even if you sprayed, you are at high risk of having them this year. The female essentially fills up the bag at the end of the summer with eggs; anywhere from 500 to 1,000 eggs. So if you missed just one female bagworm with your spray, you will have a lot this year. So plan on treating again this year just in case. If you haven't had bagworms on your junipers for several years, you can hold off on spraying until you see if bagworms show up. Be diligent and check your shrubs closely every week.

The choice of insecticide is probably far less critical than how it is applied. To make sure that you have good thorough coverage, a hose end sprayer is the application method of choice. You want to treat the infested plant to the point that the spray is dripping off the foliage. The small one to three gallon canister sprayers just don't apply enough product unless you have a very small plant to treat. Fortunately, many of the lawn and garden insecticide products now come with their own hose end sprayer. You just hook up the garden hose, turn on the water and the sprayer automatically meters out the insecticide as you spray. Make sure you get thorough coverage including the very tops of trees. Apply two sprays; one now and the second spray two weeks or so after the first.

For those who would prefer an organic or natural approach, you can hand pick the bagworms off the shrub and seal them in a plastic bag and toss in the trash. OR you can use the natural insecticide called spinosad that is very effective on bagworms, even large late season bagworms. But again, use a hose end sprayer. You may have to buy one that you mix the spray yourself however.

We have bagworms every year. You may not have them this year, you may not have them next year. But if you have juniper shrubs you will eventually have them and will need to treat. Start inspecting your junipers (and arborvitae) now and keep checking on a weekly basis through August.