

Why the Fuss About a Spotted Lanternfly?

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

More than likely you've seen some little press snippet or social media post. In the past couple of weeks, about a 4-Her's insect collection at the Kansas State Fair containing an insect known as a Spotted Lanternfly. The insect was collected in Colby (Thomas County) and its presence in the collection created quite a commotion which some people may not totally understand.

Spotted Lanternfly is not native to North America, but to southeastern Asia. It hitched a ride into the eastern US, likely in a shipping crate, sometime prior to 2014 when it was first discovered in Berks County, Pennsylvania. Lanternflies are a type of plant hopper. Both the adult and the nymph are quite striking in appearance. Adults are about 1 inch long. They have a piercing-sucking mouthpart. They insert their mouthpart into the plant and suck up the sap. These injuries to the plant often result in sap oozing out. You can have dozens or hundreds of them feeding on a plant at once and this can stress even a large tree. Additionally, as the lanternfly feeds it often excretes a sweet substance known as honeydew. This honeydew can coat a plant and also start to develop a sooty mold growing on it. All of this can block sunlight getting to photosynthetic surfaces blocking the production of food. This one-two punch can seriously harm the health of a plant or even kill it.

Anytime a plant or an insect is moved out of its native range it frequently does not have any native controls (parasites or diseases) that helped keep its population in check. That is the case that we have here in North America. The previous closest known population was in southeastern Indiana which is why one being found in Kansas is shocking and concerning. The heart of the known populations is really eastern Pennsylvania, New Jersey, southeast New York, and a little bit into Maryland, Delaware and extreme northern Virginia. Scattered small detections have been made into Ohio and the already mentioned Indiana.

Based on reports that I've seen so far, the lanternfly that the 4-Her collected was an adult, already dead and collected in May. Lanternflies overwinter as an egg mass. Those eggs hatch in the spring, the nymphs start feeding and then adults start to emerge in July. We do not yet know how that one lanternfly arrived. The USDA Animal Plant Health Inspection Service and Kansas Department of Agriculture will be busy in the weeks ahead trying to determine a lot of these things. More than likely the adult had died last year. Did it lay eggs in Kansas before it died? Was it dead and on the front of someone's vehicle who traveled down I-70? We may never know. The best case scenario is that it was dead when it arrived in the state and through some quirky action it wound up on a residential deck in Colby.

This incident does point out how easily insect pests can be transferred halfway across the country. We know that many insect pests are unintentionally transported on vehicles, in firewood, in shipping crates, there are really just so many ways it can happen. Even within Kansas, the emerald ash borer is slowly moving this way and is as close as Shawnee County. Don't move any raw wood from points east of here! In the meantime, there are some excellent websites that can help you learn what a spotted lanternfly looks like. Pennsylvania has a very good one at: <https://extension.psu.edu/spotted-lanternfly>. And if you ever see some insect that looks suspect, please take a photo or collect the insect and contact the Extension Office immediately!