

FIGHT LOBATE LAC SCALE WITH OIL SPRAY

Lobate lac scale is a new scourge and extremely potent threat to South Florida plants. This exotic insect pest was first seen here in 1999 and last year spread into many private and public gardens and natural areas in Dade and Broward Counties. You will instantly recognize this small, dark scale with four lobes. Heavy infestations form a solid crust of insects.

Native and non-native plants have been affected and some, especially the native wax myrtles, are dead or in decline. Some species, however, apparently can tolerate the scale, which is good news. The search has begun for potential biological control agents, but it is at least 2 years away from release if one is found.

Most “native plant people” want to avoid using dangerous chemicals. Many are reporting success with oil sprays to kill adults and to stop the spread of the scale by its “crawlers. Ultrafine, Superfine and Sunspray horticultural oils, available in the pesticide section of garden centers, are appropriate for our hot weather. (Do not use volck oil, which burns plants here.) Organocide has also been used successfully. The best time to spray is when plants are dry, wind is calm and the temperature has dropped. Spraying in late afternoon may increase effectiveness and lessen the likelihood of plant damage. Be careful with an oil spray during hot weather to avoid plant damage. Read the label to see what maximum temperature is listed. With any oil spray, first test on a few leaves and wait a couple days to check for phototoxicity. Thoroughly cover twigs (the favorite spot of the scale) and repeat the treatment weekly for a month. After that, reapply when new scales are found. The old dead scales may persist for a long time and be confused with live scales.

If you prefer to use a homemade spray, Adrian Hunsburger, Urban Horticulture Agent/Entomologist at the University of Florida Miami-Dade Extension, recommends: 1-2 Tablespoons of vegetable oil per gallon of distilled (or reverse osmosis) water -- 50 cents/gal at the grocery store. (Or use 1-2 Tbsp. vegetable oil to 1 gal water, 1 Tbsp. white vinegar to lower the water’s pH.) Use a few drops of liquid detergent if you aren’t getting good coverage.

If the plant is too large to spray completely and is in decline, you may resort to a root drench containing *imidacloprid*. Check in the pesticide section of garden centers and at agricultural supply stores. This should not be used on fruit trees. Strictly follow all directions and safety precautions.

Some people have removed light infestations on small plants by picking off scales. Avoid hard scraping as this can open the bark to infection. Severe pruning of fast-growing shrubs such as firebush and wax myrtle has also been used to help get ahead of an infestation, either before or after treating with oil spray. Try to seal up infected cuttings in a bag to avoid spreading. Kill them in the bag in the freezer or by baking in the sun.

Don’t forget that many homemade remedies for plant problems are ineffective and more dangerous than “chemicals” on the market. Check out these concoctions with an expert before using them. The Miami-Dade Extension phone number is 305-248-3311 and their web site is miami-dade.ifas.ufl.edu.

Information from Adrian Hunsburger (Miami-Dad Extension) and numerous DCFNPS members, compiled by the editor.

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