Pest Corner

April, 2005

Here are some common pests you may experience this month. For more information about them, visit Hortsense, the WSU website or Don Tapio's articles.

Apple Scab is a common fungal disease in high rainfall and humidity areas. If uncontrolled, scab may defoliate trees and blemish or damage the fruit. Apple scab infection can appear at any stage of fruit development and storage. Early season infections of the young leaf and bud may cause blossom blight and fruit drop.

The key to successfully controlling scab at this stage is to apply fungicides early and thoroughly to protect new growth. WSU recommends spraying a registered fungicide like Captan 50 WP, Mancozeb, Ferbam Granuflo etc., according to the label at petal fall, and then every 7 to 10 days until dry weather prevails. To reduce work, either plant scab-resistant cultivars, such as Akane and Chehalis, or plant dwarf or semi-dwarf varieties that allow for good spray coverage. Prune to open the tree to good air circulation and light penetration. Rake and destroy leaves; do not compost them. (See Washington State University Extension publications EB1044-Apple Scab and EB0419, Crop Protection Guide for Tree Fruits in WA.)

Earwigs (native and European types) are effective in controlling apple aphids. In experiments, earwigs have reduced aphids from 500 to 50 per tree in just three weeks. However, earwigs are omnivorous and feed on both dead organic material as well as tender plant tissues.

Moles are insectivores that eat mostly grubs, beetle larvae, centipedes, spiders, and earthworms. Their digging improves the soil, but is unsightly to homeowners and can expose plant roots to the air. (Mole mounds are round like a volcano cone with dirt forced up through the center and no open hole: pocket gopher mounds are fan shaped with dirt thrown in one direction leaving an open or plugged hole.) Moles are blamed for plant damage that is really caused by the voles, pocket gophers, and other rodents that move into abandoned mole tunnels and eat seeds, bulbs, and roots.

Stomping down mole hills, flooding the tunnels, and protecting plants with a buried solid barrier may encourage moles and rodents to move elsewhere. Other home remedies have not proven to be effective. In WA, it is still illegal to trap moles with pinching devices.

Western Tent Caterpillars are a serious nuisance in western Washington. Periodic outbreaks result in masses of unsightly tents and defoliation of deciduous trees. Tent caterpillars prefer alder, apple, ash, birch, cherry, cottonwood, willow, fruit trees, and roses, but during heavy infestations, will feed on many other plants. Early in their development, tent caterpillars will eat all the leaves on one branch before moving to the next. Later, they split into smaller groups and attack several branches. A single occurrence rarely kills a tree, but it reduces growth and makes the tree more susceptible to drought, freezing, and disease. An otherwise healthy, infested tree usually grows new leaves by midsummer.

While caterpillars are distasteful to most birds, there are some that eat them. Other benefits of tent caterpillars include increasing sunlight to the shrubs and trees below, returning nutrients to the forest floor, their pupae providing nutrition for small mammals; and their moths being eaten by birds and bats.

Tent caterpillars can be controlled by removing their brown or gray, hard frothy-looking egg cases from trees or buildings. After the caterpillars hatch, remove and destroy the larvae and their nests by stripping or pruning them from tree branches. (Burning the nests has been known to cause fires and is not recommended). Infested trees may be sprayed with a biological insecticide, Bacillus thuringiensis (B.t.), which is relatively safe for other insects (such as bees), fish, birds, and warm-blooded animals. The caterpillars must eat a moderate amount of treated leaf to get an effective dose and thorough coverage of foliage is necessary. Spraying should not begin until early signs of leaf damage appear.