Unwelcome Visitors to Your Azalea Beds

By Susan Camp

Life doesn't get much better than relaxing outside on a late summer evening, enjoying a pleasant recap of the day, with good cooking smells coming from the grill. My husband and I were lounging in the back yard one evening last weekend when I glanced over his shoulder at some mature azaleas planted around our gazebo. "That third plant looks pretty dry", I told him. "I'll water it tomorrow", he responded, and the topic was forgotten.

Two nights later, we were back in our usual spots waiting for supper to cook. Again, I looked over at the same spot and said "Uh-oh, something's wrong." The single, brown azalea had morphed into three plants almost stripped of leaves. We got up to look and found two scary-looking creatures. Jim had his smartphone and quickly snapped a picture.

Later that evening, a brief Google search of caterpillar images revealed a photo of the red-headed azalea caterpillar, but by that time the damage had occurred. The azalea caterpillar (Datana major) is native to North America and Mexico and is a significant defoliator of azaleas from Maine to Florida and west to Arkansas and Kansas. Surprisingly little is known about this major pest of azaleas. Damage from the azalea caterpillar to blueberry, apple, red oak, and andromeda (Pieris japonica) also has been reported. Damage often is extensive by the time it is discovered.

The caterpillar pupates in the soil and the nondescript, tan-colored moth with a 1 ¾ inch wingspan emerges in early summer. The female moth deposits 50 to 100 eggs on the undersides of leaves in June or July. Caterpillars appear in midsummer. The immature caterpillars are yellow with black heads and horizontal stripes. The 3/8 inch caterpillars cluster together to feed, skeletonizing the azalea leaves. Immature azalea caterpillars will succumb to Bacillus thuringiensis (B.t.), a soil-dwelling bacterium that is used as an insecticide. B.t. is sold under several brand names. Check the undersides of azalea leaves in spring or early summer for eggs or young caterpillars.

The mature azalea caterpillar is 2 inches long and easily recognizable by its bright red head, tail, and legs. Its black body is broken by yellow or white horizontal lines, giving it an almost plaid appearance. The caterpillar's body is covered with fine, soft hairs, making it look dangerous, but it is harmless to humans and can be removed by hand. When disturbed, the caterpillar will spin a fine, silk thread and hang suspended a few inches below the leaf. It can curve into a "U" shape if touched or prodded. The adult azalea caterpillar eats entire leaves, leaving only the central veins. Most of the damage from the azalea caterpillar occurs between August and September. Virginia Cooperative Extension Publication 430-462 "Shrub Pruning Calendar" suggests pruning azaleas in spring or early summer to remove azalea caterpillar eggs or larvae.

A stronger pesticide is required to kill the adult caterpillars. Contact a Gloucester Master Gardener at (804) 693-2602 for information on pest management. If you purchase a pesticide,

follow package instructions carefully. Gloucester Master Gardeners are available each Tuesday at the Main Library from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. and at the Extension Office every Thursday from 2 p.m. to 3 p.m.

The Clemson University Extension article “Test Your Knowledge— September” contains color photographs of the eggs, immature and mature caterpillars, and moths. The NCSU Cooperative Extension article “Arthropod Pests of Azalea” offers brief snapshots of several problem insects, including Datana major.

We haven’t discovered any more caterpillars, although at least two more azaleas on the other side of the gazebo have been partially defoliated. I can’t believe that two caterpillars caused all of the damage, so I know they are still around and must be treated. The next step will be to plan prevention strategies for next summer. There are some visitors that are just not welcome.

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