

Small Serpents in Paradise

As for snakes, I think they are greatly maligned. The first one I met, up close and personal, was laid in my outstretched palm when I asked the two feisty first-graders to let me put into my desk drawer whatever it was they were squabbling about. Whoops! – but I was surprised how cool and silky it was. Last week I met a young black snake twined in the inkberry bush and it was kinked like a bad perm. It was not merely curved but kinked in sharp angles. However, it is not the real snakes that cloud a perfect spring but the minor irks.

We needed rain if not the storm that came with it. Picking up the resultant limbs gave me the opportunity to look at the shrubs up close and personal. Leaf galls often appear on Azalea leaves during a wet spring but the ones that caught my eye were on the Sasanqua Camellias. They were not additions to the leaf structure but a group of terminal leaves that were light green and waxy. I chased ‘galls’ through all the reference books on the shelf but couldn’t find enough information.

The ‘book’ says Camellias can be subject to Exobasidium gall but didn’t specify its location. What I have on the Camellia resembles the Azalea leaf gall that results in soft yellow-green bladders on the leaves, so the same protocols may apply. They are ugly but not dangerous. It is good to remove them to the trash (not the compost) before they darken, harden, and develop the white velvety layer that produces spores. After overwintering, a warm wet spring continues the cycle.

Aside from handpicking the uglies, good culture helps prevent reoccurrence. Air circulation is essential as is avoiding wetting the foliage when watering.

At least galls do not attack gardeners. Poison ivy does. In reading about the problem of alien plant invasions I was not at all surprised to learn that the poison in poison ivy is more virulent due to global warming: I suspected, having had a two-week siege of the miserable itch.

From May-June Audubon Magazine: “Researchers at Duke University published a study in 2006 revealing that increasing the carbon dioxide in an intact forest ecosystem is like putting poison ivy...on steroids. Not only does its growth rate and girth go crazy, it also produces a mega-dose of the allergen that makes people itch.”

Not only more poison ivy but more tent caterpillars do you think? I remember as a child seeing farmers torch the webs that grew on the trees in their hedgerows. These miserable critters are especially fond of the prunus family, apples, crab apples etc. They can be sprayed with sevin or Bt, following labels instructions but the egg masses can be seen on the leafless tree in winter and can be rubbed out before they hatch.

What we are seeing now are tent caterpillars but in the fall we will have webworms from the eggs being laid on the underside of leaves in spring. Since the webworms drop to the soil to pupate, a sticky patch surrounding the tree’s trunk will keep them from heading up the tree. It is dismaying to see caterpillars munching away on those first roses but there will be more roses!

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