The Olive Shootworm
Recognize the Signs of These Hungry Ornamental Pests
Page 1

Love is in The Air
A Few Reminders for the 2nd Lovebug Swarm of the Year
Page 2

Customer Questions
“Was I Bitten by a Brown Recluse?”
Page 3

Combine Your Services
Enjoy the Convenience of All-in-One Servicing
Page 4

The Olive Shootworm

Here in Florida it seems we’re never at a shortage of new pests being introduced into our ecosystem. Most recently, we’ve noticed a new species in our midst, this time joining us from South America: The olive shootworm (Palpita persimilis). It was discovered that this pest had made its way into our backyard when a UF/IFAS Sumter County Master Gardener found some specimens feeding on her ligustrum tree. Since then, these ornamental pests have been spotted throughout Florida with pockets of infestations being brought to our attention most commonly in the retirement community of The Villages, located in Lake, Sumter, and Marion counties.

Olive Shootworms are actually caterpillars and they look very similar to other native species that share their common green color and measure just under an inch. But these caterpillars are of the variety destined to become moths—not butterflies—and like all caterpillars, they’re voracious herbivores.

Originally a notable pest of olives and privets, here in Florida they seem to prefer ligustrum, though they seem to be widening their palate to other types of ornamental plants as well. While they generally focus on the fresh, tender leaves of new growth, more mature caterpillars can also damage established foliage, skeletonizing leaves and leaving behind unsightly damage.

The Silken Shield

After a sufficient feeding, shootworms spin a cocoon using leaves and silk and remain in this pupal stage for about two weeks. Unfortunately, during this dormant pupal stage, shootworms are protected from insecticide applications. It’s only once the caterpillars emerge from their protective cocoon as winged adults that they’re affected, or even able to be positively identified. In fact, with their orange bands and white wings, they look similar to small butterflies and might even be described as pretty—at least relative to most moths. The bottom moth pictured above is about actual size.

But while these adults can be controlled slightly when treated directly with an insecticide, chemical applications have been deemed fairly ineffective by leading entomologists. Instead, it seems the best
defense for now is to remove any pupa and damaged leaves. James Hayden and Lyle Buss of the University of Florida IFAS Extension recommend “trimming foliage to remove eggs and nests […] because any surviving larvae will prefer to consume the resulting new growth.”

Here at Deans, we’ll continue to treat as often as is allowed by product label to minimize their damage, but if you’re currently noticing damage that may appear to be caused by olive shootworms, remember that even after a treatment has been applied—in fact, even if many of the pests have been killed—their damage, webbing, and other signs of their presence will remain visible until the affected foliage grows out or is removed.

A ligustrum ornamental under attack by the Olive Shootworm.

WEATHERING THE SWARM

Yep, it’s that time again! Floridians know to brace themselves for an onslaught of lovebugs during May and September of each year. But even if this year’s second lovebug swarm has already ended by the time you’re reading this, here are a few reminders and a tip on dried lovebug removal that’s sure to come in handy!

- Try to avoid driving long distances during peak lovebug swarming hours (10-11 am and 6-8 pm).
- Install an automotive grill cover on your vehicle for each 3 to 4-week swarm season.
- Remove any dead lovebugs from your vehicle quickly to avoid possible damage to the paint.
- Use a dampened dryer sheet to safely remove lovebugs from your vehicle without scratches (just be sure to reapply the wax to keep that showroom shine).
- Keep doors and windows closed—especially during peak swarming hours.
- Avoid chemicals for the occasional lovebug you may find inside your home. Instead, try using a vacuum for a quick and safe removal.
If you’re unfamiliar with the horror stories commonly associated with Brown Recluse spiders, I’ll warn you in advance that the details of these tales aren’t for the faint-of-heart. This is because Recluse spider bites are known for their ability to induce necrosis—that is, a bacterial reaction that results in open sores at the bite area.

It’s this horrific hallmark that has led many people to be extra cautious when they happen across any spider that bears any resemblance to the elusive Brown Recluse. But the truth is that the chance of any bite or skin lesion being the result of a Recluse bite is exceedingly slim.

This is because, aside from a slender portion of the panhandle, the Brown Recluse isn’t naturally found in Florida. In fact, because the spider is so reclusive, it’s rarely encountered even within the states it is found. Additionally, the Recluse is not an aggressive species and will bite only as a last resort if it feels critically threatened, such as when it might become trapped under clothing. And even such cases, only a fraction of the bites result in necrosis. Still, each year, thousands of individuals are misdiagnosed—professionally or otherwise—with Recluse bites; and countless spiders are mistaken for this rare species.

This is because a number of dermatological infections have the potential to result in necrosis; and thousands of spider species look strikingly similar to the Recluse. In fact, in our many years of operation, we here at Deans have yet to positively identify a Brown Recluse spider in this area—though we’ve been presented with many spiders thought to be such. So, for anyone looking to travel west, let’s take a look at a few points that will help you identify the passive but potentially dangerous Brown Recluse.

**Eye Configuration:** The best known factor used to identify a Recluse is the dark brown violin-shape on top of its “head”; but because so many spiders have patterns that are easily mistaken as “violins”, we recommend looking at the eye pattern. A Recluse will have six eyes—two directly in front, and two on the left and right. Check out the rather creepy enlarged view on the top-right and notice the silhouette of a fiddle with the eyes at the base.

**Solid Abdomen:** Unlike other similar species of brown spiders, the brown Recluse abdomen—or ‘butt’, if I might abandon the entomological jargon—will be solid brown as opposed to mottled or striped.

**Solid Legs:** Like the abdomen, the legs of the Recluse will be solid brown. Also, unlike many other types of spiders, the legs are smooth and hairless.

**Smaller Size:** Recluses are a little smaller than most people think. We’re often presented with Wolf Spiders as Recluse candidates, but these intimidating spiders are far too large. A Recluse will fit under a quarter—including all eight legs. The full-body image above is actual size.

Always remember to exercise caution when identifying spiders; although the Brown Recluse isn’t well-established here, you may still encounter another dangerous species. To reduce spider populations around your home, remove excess clutter from closets or attics (spiders are attracted to dark, cluttered spaces), store firewood away from your home, and keep landscaping trimmed away from your home. And of course, if you haven’t already, ask about our Home Pest program to help reduce spiders and the pests that attract them!
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