

Hackberry Psyllids Starting to Swarm Around Hackberry Trees

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

If you have a hackberry tree in your yard you have probably noticed that the leaves often have funny little bumps on them, usually protruding out of the bottom of the leaf. These bumps are caused by a little insect called the hackberry psyllid, also known as the hackberry nipplegall maker. While the adult may remind some folks of a gnat, it is in the same insect order with treehoppers, whiteflies and cicadas. In fact, if you see one under magnification they sort of look like a miniature cicada.

Their life cycle starts in the spring when the adults that overwintered come out of hibernation about the time that the buds start to break on the hackberry trees. The females lay their eggs on the tiny little emerging leaves. The eggs hatch, the tiny insect larva starts to feed on the leaf surface and compounds in the insect's saliva cause the leaf to make an abnormal growth (gall) to grow around the insect. The larva spends the rest of the summer safely tucked away inside this gall feeding away. If a leaf is heavily infested with galls, the tree will shed that leaf early in the summer. But many leaves will have just a few galls on them and they will stay on the tree. The leaf continues to be photosynthetically functional, the tree doesn't suffer any ill effects, so the insect really isn't bad for the tree.

You can probably tell right away that control of the insect is neither an option nor necessary as it doesn't threaten the health of the tree. The tree and the insect have probably existed together for millenia. Normal foliar sprays won't do any good as the insect is safely encased in plant tissue. The period of egg laying is also extended over several weeks so trying to control the adults at egg laying time isn't going to work either. Some systemic insecticide treatments may help but are not normally recommended because of the expense involved.

From a tree perspective, treatment isn't justified or needed. The real problem comes in the fall however. As the leaves are now dropping off trees, the adult psyllids start to emerge from those little galls, looking for places to overwinter. They will fly around for a while and then start to find somewhere to overwinter. Some will find a tree with lots of cracks and crevices on the bark, some will just burrow into the litter under the tree, but others will head to our houses. They don't fly far so if you have a hackberry tree in your yard, you are probably starting to see the psyllids on the screens or windows of your house.

They will try to get into your house to spend the winter. This action is likely to result in their mortality as most homes are too dry for their successful overwintering survival. As you come home and enter your house, they are liable to come right along with you. Some will fly in as the door opens, others will hitch a ride on your clothing. Keep in mind that they won't do any direct damage in your home, nor do they bite, although they do have pointy little legs that may feel like they are biting you when they land on you.

You can spray around your house and up on the foundation with any lawn and garden insecticide to knock down the ones present there. For those on your screens, the best approach may be to use an aerosol flying insect killer. These will kill those on your screens, but you may need to treat again tomorrow. It also helps to make sure the house is well sealed and keep windows closed if you see them on your screen. With cold weather coming in a few weeks, we should be through the nuisance period for this insect soon!