

Get Ready For Bagworm Control

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Bagworms are a serious insect pest of cedars and junipers. Cedars are a juniper so I will just refer to junipers through the rest of this column. Bagworms are NOT the big webby masses that show up on the ends of many different tree species branches in the late summer. Bagworms are the little critters that feed on the junipers and make a little case that they decorate with bits of foliage from the host plant.

Bagworms are in the butterfly and moth family. The larval, or caterpillar, life stage is what is in the little bag and does the feeding damage. Once they finish feeding in the late summer, they pupate into adult moths. The female is wingless however so male moths fly to them, they mate, she fills her little bagworm bag with eggs and then dies. One female can lay anywhere from 500 to 1,000 eggs in that bag. Those eggs are starting to hatch now and will be finished hatching, usually, by about June 10th.

When the young bagworms first start feeding the bags are very small, a quarter inch long or so. They are easily overlooked if all you are looking for is the bag. But within a few days of feeding, the color of the infested juniper starts to change from a normal color to a light green color. If you notice a juniper, or arborvitae, slightly changing color, start looking for the tiny little bagworm bags.

If left untreated the bagworms will continue to feed and grow through late July. The bigger they get the more damage they do. Homeowners who are not paying attention to their junipers can all of a sudden come home from work in July to find extreme damage and their juniper covered with large bagworm bags. By that time, control can be very difficult to achieve.

While they are primarily a pest of junipers, they have been documented feeding on over 200 species of plants. Most plants can recover quickly from bagworm feeding but not so for junipers and the occasional blue spruce. These plants grow from the tips out. They do not have dormant buds that can break dormancy to create new leaves as a rose bush or an elm tree can. So unless bagworms are on a juniper, spruce or perhaps an arborvitae, don't treat them.

I am not a proponent of spraying every juniper, every year, "just in case". If you find an active bagworm infestation, then certainly spray. If you had bagworms last year, even if you did spray, plan to spray this year. If you have noticed bagworms on your neighbors juniper, then treat your's. Remember, even if you sprayed last year, even one bag that survived can generate several hundred new little bagworms this spring.

Because bagworms hatch late and there is only one generation per year, I recommend two treatments about two weeks apart, basically June 10th and 24th. The first spray should get a majority of them, the second spray is for any that were missed or late hatching individuals. There are many yard and garden insecticides labeled for bagworms and they all work well. The key is to apply with a hose end sprayer. You need to soak the tree to make sure you get the insecticide through that bag and in to the bagworm. A pump up one or two gallon sprayer simply can not apply enough material to be effective. Remember that it's easy to control them in June, very hard to control them the end of July!

Bagworms are around every year. There are not adequate natural enemies to keep them under control. Pay close attention to your junipers, look for early season discoloration as a cue that there may be bagworms, and then inspect the foliage for small bagworms. For more information and photos of bagworms go to gardeningwithchuck.com and click on "Bagworms".