

It's Almost Time For Bagworm Control

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

One of the things that homeowners hate almost as much as crabgrass is bagworms. Unlike crabgrass, we can't do a preventative treatment for bagworms. They can only be controlled once they are present. But like crabgrass, early signs of an infestation are often overlooked by homeowners. I need to stop at this point and clarify what pest I'm referring to. Bagworms are the insects that create a tiny bag around themselves that they cover with small pieces of whatever plant they are feeding on. The insects that make the large webby masses at the ends of deciduous tree branches in mid and late summer are webworms, not bagworms!

Bagworms are a pest primarily of junipers (cedars). While they will feed on over 200 species of plants, their preference is junipers and the damage they do is by far the worst on junipers. Junipers, like most all evergreens, grow from the tips of the branches out. Deciduous trees have dormant buds hidden under bark that they can trigger into action and start new growth from nearly anywhere. Which is why when you cut off a cedar tree it is dead and doesn't re-sprout, but when you cut off an elm tree, it sprouts up and just keeps growing.

When a bagworm strips all the foliage off a juniper it has usually also eaten off the new growth buds. With these buds gone, that branch has no where to grow from and the branch is dead. If the entire tree/bush has been nearly stripped, it's likely that the plant will die. Which is why bagworms can be so devastating to junipers!

In the late summer, bagworms finish feeding and pupate in their "bags". They are in the insect order Lepidoptera so they turn into a moth. The female is flightless and never actually leaves her bag. The male bagworm moth does fly and reacts to pheromones released by the female. After mating the female develops several hundred up to a thousand eggs and basically dies there in the bag with the eggs.

The eggs overwinter, un-phased by winter's cold weather. In late spring the eggs hatch and the young bagworms move out of their mother's bag and start feeding on the host plant. Two important things to note here. The females don't move around much, nor do the young bagworms. The young will sometimes spin fine silken threads that they will use to move in the wind just like spiders will do. The eggs don't normally hatch until very late May or early June. Removal and destruction of old bagworm bags prior to that time can greatly reduce infestations for the current year. Notice I said destroy, not just drop on the ground. Collect them and toss them in the trash or a burn barrel!

If you had bagworms last year, you'll have bagworms this year. Even if you sprayed there is a good chance you will have a few. If your neighbors had bagworms, your junipers are at risk. The young may not travel for miles, but they can crawl for fifty feet or so! Since the eggs hatch late, I recommend two treatments in June about two weeks apart. I suggest June 10 and June 25. By using two treatments you get most the first time and late hatching, or those that avoided the spray, on the second treatment.

Many products are labeled for bagworms. You need to apply a thorough soaking spray so use a hose end sprayer, not a pump up one to three gallon canister sprayer. Many products are now available that come with their own hose end sprayer. You don't have to mix, just hook up the hose and spray! It's very convenient and no worries about left over spray!