

Look Out for Crape Myrtle Bark Scale!

By Susan Camp

Spring has finally arrived after a long, strange winter of warm weeks, cold weeks, one frigid episode at Christmas, and no snow. Now that our yards and gardens are waking up and displaying their spring green attire, so too are pesky insects emerging to wreak havoc on our trees, shrubs, and perennials.

At our May meeting, fellow Gloucester Master Gardener Wanda Eberle suggested crape myrtle bark scale as a timely topic for this column after reading the report, “How to Deal with the Crape Myrtle Bark Scale,” by Joe Heim, a reporter for The Washington Post. In August 2022, I wrote about several insect pests of crape myrtle, including bark scale, which at that time was considered an emerging pest in Virginia. Nine months later, crape myrtle bark scale is proving to be an ongoing problem for homeowners with crape myrtle trees.

Many people believe that the colorful, summer-blooming ornamental tree or shrub is a native, but crape myrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica*), also spelled crepe myrtle and crapemyrtle, was first introduced to North America from Asia in 1747. *L. indica* is prone to powdery mildew and not cold hardy in some regions, so *Lagerstroemia fauriei* was introduced from Japan in the 1950’s and hybridized with *L. indica* to produce many of the hardy, elegant crape myrtles we see today. Powdery mildew, honeydew-producing crape myrtle aphids, and Japanese beetles soon invaded, to the chagrin of homeowners, who love the ruffled flowers and peeling, cinnamon-colored bark.

Crape myrtle bark scale (CMBS), is the latest insect to attack crape myrtles. CMBS (*Acanthococcus laegerstromiae*) probably was imported from Asia in infested nursery stock, and has spread eastward since it first emerged in Texas in 2004.

The pinkish scale insect produces a whitish-gray waxy material that encrusts branches and trunks and may exude a pink fluid when crushed. CMBS is a stressor to crape myrtles rather than a killer, affecting flowering time and amount and overall plant vigor.

Like the crape myrtle aphid, CMBS excretes honeydew, a sugary medium for fungal sooty mold that leaves branches and trunks blackened. Sooty mold is relatively harmless, but it is unsightly. It can be removed with a mild dish soap solution (4 ounces per gallon of water) left on for 3 to 4 minutes, followed by a rinse with the garden hose or with application of horticultural oil.

If you plan to purchase a crape myrtle, buy in-person from a reputable dealer, and inspect the tree for infestation by bark scale. Plant in full sun and fertilize sparingly; too much nitrogen may encourage bark scale. The best choice would be to plant a different ornamental, preferably a native. Now is not a good time to plant crape myrtle, especially if you have unaffected trees. The infestation will spread to them.

If your crape myrtles are already affected by CMBS, there are several methods you can use to rid your trees of bark scale, but know that you will have to treat your trees every year.

Horticultural oil and insecticidal soap may be helpful, especially if infested branches are pruned first to discourage pollinators and provide better access to the tree's inner branches.

The adult ladybird beetle (*Hyperaspis begeminata*), a shiny black insect with two red spots, is a predator of CMBS. The larvae of this beetle have a cottony white coating and can be mistaken for CMBS; however, the larvae will move when touched, unlike adult CMBS.

Apply a soil drench of imidacloprid or dinotefuran in spring as the leaves emerge. Always apply insecticides according to the product directions. Contact a Gloucester Master Gardener or Tree Steward through the Gloucester Extension Office at (804) 693-2602 for information on safe use of insecticides or pesticides.

See Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication ENTO-465NP "Crapemyrtle Bark Scale"; Fairfax Gardening "Crape Myrtle Bark Scale on Crape Myrtle Trees" (Fairfax Master Gardeners); and Clemson Home & Garden Information Center Factsheet HGIC 2002 "Crape Myrtle Diseases and Insect Pests" for detailed information.

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