Common Landscape Pests in Oklahoma

Identification, Symptoms and Control

Oklahoma landscapes are home to a variety of insect pests that can damage turf, trees, and ornamental plants. Seven common offenders—armyworms, bagworms, cutworms, webworms, emerald ash borer, red spider mites, and lace bugs—can cause significant harm if left unchecked. Understanding their life cycles, host plants, symptoms, and management is key to maintaining healthy landscapes.

Armyworms

Armyworms (Spodoptera frugiperda) are caterpillars that voraciously feed on turfgrasses, especially bermudagrass and fescue. They appear from late summer into early fall, often after rainy weather. These caterpillars are green to brown with lengthwise stripes and feed in large groups, quickly “marching” across lawns. Symptoms include ragged leaf blades, brown patches, and bare spots as grass is eaten to the crown. Early detection is crucial since they can destroy lawns overnight. Treatment includes using insecticides labeled for turf pests and maintaining healthy, vigorously growing grass. Prompt control usually results in full lawn recovery.

Bagworms

Bagworms (Thyridopteryx ephemeraeformis) are moth larvae that build protective bags of silk covered with plant debris. They primarily infest junipers, arborvitae, cedars, and other evergreens but can also attack deciduous trees. Bagworms emerge in late May through June

and feed through summer. Infestation symptoms include browning foliage and defoliation, as larvae consume needles and leaves. Light infestations can be managed by hand-picking and destroying bags before eggs hatch. For heavier infestations, insecticides such as Bacillus thuringiensis (Bt) applied to young larvae in early summer are effective. Severe damage can weaken or kill trees, but early intervention improves prognosis.

Cutworms

Cutworms (Agrotis spp.) are night-feeding caterpillars that cut young seedlings at the soil surface. They attack vegetables, annual flowers, and turfgrass in spring and early summer. These larvae hide in soil during the day and emerge at night to feed. Symptoms include wilted or severed plants and small bare patches in turf. Control involves removing plant debris where larvae hide, using collars around seedlings, and applying insecticides if populations are high. Early detection ensures plants recover quickly from minor damage.

Webworms

Fall webworms (Hyphantria cunea) are moth larvae that create silk webbing over the ends of tree branches. They attack over 90 species, including pecan, walnut, mulberry, and persimmon. Webworms are active from late summer into fall, producing unsightly webs filled with feeding caterpillars. While webs cause defoliation, healthy trees typically survive infestations. Management includes pruning out and destroying infested branches and, when necessary, applying insecticides to young larvae before webs enlarge. Most trees recover well without long-term effects.

Emerald Ash Borer

The emerald ash borer (Agrilus planipennis) is an invasive beetle that targets ash trees. Adults emerge in late spring, laying eggs on bark; larvae tunnel beneath the bark, disrupting nutrient flow. Symptoms include canopy thinning, branch dieback, epicormic shoots (sprouts on trunks), D-shaped exit holes, and bark splits. Left untreated, infestations usually kill ash trees within a few years. Preventive insecticide treatments are available for high-value trees, but heavily infested trees are often beyond saving. The prognosis is poor for untreated trees, emphasizing the importance of early detection and management.

Red Spider Mites

Red spider mites (various Tetranychus spp.) are tiny arachnids that thrive in hot, dry conditions, damaging a wide range of plants including ornamentals, vegetables, and trees.

They feed by piercing leaves, causing stippling, yellowing, and leaf drop. Fine webbing may be visible in severe infestations. They are active throughout summer, with populations exploding in drought-stressed landscapes. Control includes spraying leaves with water to knock off mites, encouraging natural predators, and using miticides only when necessary. With proper care, plants typically recover.

Lace Bugs

Lace bugs (Corythucha spp.) are small insects with lace-like wings that feed on the undersides of leaves of azalea, sycamore, oak, and other ornamentals. They are active from spring through fall, causing yellow stippling and bronzing on upper leaf surfaces and leaving dark excrement spots below. Severe infestations lead to premature leaf drop and reduced plant vigor. Management includes washing leaves, applying insecticidal soaps or horticultural oils, and using systemic insecticides for persistent problems. Prompt treatment helps plants recover with minimal long-term damage.

By recognizing the life cycles and symptoms of these seven pests, Oklahoma gardeners can apply timely control measures. Regular monitoring, early intervention, and good plant care remain the best strategies to minimize damage and preserve healthy landscapes.

Resources

Oklahoma State University Resources on Subject Insects:
Armyworms
Bagworms
Cutworms
Webworms
Emerald Ash Borer
Red Spider Mites
Lace Bugs