

Conquering Crape Myrtle Bark Scale (CMBS): A Guide to Identification and Effective Control

Crape Myrtle trees, with their vibrant blooms and graceful appearance, are cherished additions to any garden or landscape. However, the threat of Crape Myrtle Bark Scale (CMBS) looms over these beautiful trees, potentially causing significant damage if left unaddressed. We must equip ourselves with the knowledge and techniques to identify and manage CMBS effectively.

Understanding Crape Myrtle Bark Scale (CMBS)

Crape Myrtle Bark Scale is a minuscule insect that belongs to the family Eriococcidae. Adult females appear as small, cottony masses, measuring approximately 1/16 to 1/8 inch, and adhere to the bark of crape myrtle trees. These clusters are often mistaken for a fungal infection or mold growth due to their appearance. When feeding on the tree's sap, CMBS excretes a sweet, sticky substance known as honeydew, which accumulates on the bark and foliage, leading to the development of sooty mold. This black, powdery mold can significantly impact the tree's aesthetic appeal and hinder photosynthesis, eventually weakening the tree's overall health.

Identifying CMBS Infestation

To protect our crape myrtle trees from CMBS, early detection is crucial. Here are key signs to identify a potential infestation:

1. **Cottony Masses** - Examine the branches and trunks of crape myrtle trees for cottony clusters. These clusters house the CMBS insects and may vary in color from white to gray, depending on the insect's life stage.

2. Sooty Mold - Keep an eye out for dark, velvety patches on the bark, leaves, and nearby surfaces. Sooty mold develops due to honeydew secretion by CMBS and is an indirect indicator of their presence.

3. Reduced Blooming - If your crape myrtle tree experiences a decline in flowering, it may indicate a CMBS infestation, as these pests can compromise the tree's vitality.

Effective Control Strategies

Master Gardeners can implement a combination of cultural, mechanical, and chemical control methods to manage CMBS and protect the health of their crape myrtle trees. Let's explore these strategies:

1. Regular Inspections - Regularly inspect your crape myrtle trees, especially during late spring and early summer, when CMBS activity is at its peak. Vigilance allows for early intervention, preventing the infestation from escalating.

2. Pruning Infested Branches - Upon discovery of CMBS-infested branches, promptly prune and dispose of the affected plant material. Be sure to cut several inches below the infestation to ensure the complete removal of pests.

3. Horticultural Oil Treatment - During the tree's dormant season, typically in late winter or early spring, apply horticultural oil to the bark and foliage. This suffocates overwintering CMBS nymphs, effectively reducing their population.

4. Systemic Insecticides - Consider using systemic insecticides containing active ingredients like imidacloprid or dinotefuran, which provide long-lasting protection against CMBS. Apply these treatments in late spring when the insects are most active.

5. Natural Predators - Foster a garden environment that encourages the presence of natural predators such as ladybugs and lacewings, which prey on CMBS. Minimize the use of broad-spectrum insecticides that might harm these beneficial insects.

6. Promote Tree Health - Ensure your crape myrtle trees receive adequate watering and fertilization to maintain their overall vigor. Healthy trees are better equipped to withstand and recover from CMBS infestations.

7. CMBS-Resistant Varieties - When planting new crape myrtle trees, opt for CMBS-resistant varieties. Research and consult local nurseries to select cultivars demonstrating natural resistance to these pests.

By integrating these control strategies into our gardening practices, we can effectively manage CMBS and protect the beauty and vitality of our cherished crape myrtle trees. Together, we can stand united against this tiny but formidable foe, ensuring our gardens thrive with the grace and splendor of crape myrtles for generations to come. Happy gardening!

Fact Sheets:

<https://extension.okstate.edu/e-pest-alerts/site-files/documents/2017/crapemyrtle-bark-scale-biology-and-management-april-20-2017.pdf>

<https://extension.okstate.edu/programs/gardening/site-files/docs/2022/october-23-crapemyrtle-bark-scale.pdf>