



This little 5/16 inch long caterpillar is what denuded many black olive trees in early May. Note the brown skeletonizing type chewing damage to the leaf.



This black olive tree was turned onto a brown olive tree in early May (2002) by the black olive caterpillar. It had refoliated about 6 weeks later.



Young larvae feed on the flowers of the 'Shady Lady' black olive, four larvae are indicated on this flower cluster by red dots.

Black Olive or Bungee Caterpillar (*Characoma nilotica*) a Nuisance Pest

A little caterpillar can defoliate 'Shady Lady' black olive (*Bucida buceras*). Calls usually start coming in mid to late April. People start fussing about the caterpillars rappelling around and getting in their faces. Some call them the bungee caterpillars or other things because of this behavior. Later, the upper canopies of infested trees turn brown and defoliate. The black olive trees looked doomed in 2002, based on a quick survey at several locations on May 1. To a person from up north, 50 to 100% browning and defoliation in early May is major stress if not sure death for many plants. Some streets of Naples reminded me of fall leaf drop in Ohio, with all of the leaf litter. But the black olive trees seemed to refoliate within four to six weeks.

These caterpillars seem to be more into vandalizing the trees rather than consuming them for food. Young larvae start off attacking the delicate flower clusters and "string down" even when there is no wind, perhaps looking for more flowers to feed on in the lower canopy. Later, larger larvae will chew some foliage, just slight skeletonizing of the lower leaf surface. All of the browned and defoliating leaves are clipped to create a feeding niche or a place to hide and spin up their little white cocoons. The dull gray moths emerge from the cocoons about in three weeks.

Not much information is available on the behavior of this moth. The eggs are probably deposited on twigs in the upper canopy that hatch next spring. The local experts say that there is only one damage period and that there won't be another generation of these little vandals. It is rather unusual for insects down here to only have one generation. Unless the tree has been struggling from poor soil or lack of water, management attempts seem to be unwarranted. Keep a close eye on these defoliated trees as borers may attack, when trees are in a weakened condition.

Applications of pesticides would have to be applied while the caterpillars are small, probably when the trees first start to flower, say sometime in the first two weeks of April. If they are caught early in their rappelling activity, the cosmetic damage could be minimized. However these these little caterpillars are usually not noticed until the damage has been done and it is too late to spray. A product with B.t. or spinosad as the active ingredients would be the "soft" pesticide product of choice. If the larvae are larger, Talstar (bifenthrin) will provide quick knock-down.

Attention landscape architects! Because of the caterpillars and the dark rusty staining of the fruit, this tree should not be planted in parking lots or near buildings or sidewalks.

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