

Extension Serves as First Alert to Protect Landscape Ornamentals from New Pests: Ficus Whitefly

Doug Caldwell, Collier County Extension

Collier County Extension serves as a critical link in the First Alert System to assist the public with frequent arrivals (in south Florida) of new, damaging landscape pests. On top of our current “everyday landscape pests”, since 2001, we have been invaded by 11 significant landscape pests:

Asian sago scale (2000);
lobate lac scale (2003);
weeping ficus thrips (2003);
pink hibiscus mealybug (2004);
Sri Lanka weevil (2004);
chili thrips (2006);
palm fusarium wilt disease (2006);
asian citrus psyllid disease(2007);
Cuban-laurel blister gall (2007);
Croton-firebush scale (2008); and most recently, the ficus whitefly (Jan. 2009).

Two of these pests have turned low maintenance plant species (sagos and blue plumbago) into high maintenance plants and thus they are not found much in the landscape. Without control strategies, we may see hibiscus, wax myrtle, crotons, firebush and even ficus become so decimated that they may not be used anymore. Other pests are knocking on our door such as the red palm mite and cabbage palm wilt disease (TPPD). However, thanks to UF/IFAS researchers control strategies are provided and redrafted into local fact sheets which helps the homeowner identify the new pest and how to best treat the invader. These fact sheets are available at our office and on our Extension web site, <http://collier.ifas.ufl.edu> .

Ficus Whitefly: The ficus whitefly, was confirmed on Florida’s west coast, in Naples, for the first time in January 2009. If no pesticides are applied, this whitefly will kill ficus hedges and trees. Ficus hedges provide both visual and noise security.

Objectives: Alert the public and professional landscapers so they know to be proactive if they want to save their ficus hedges. Show them how to diagnose this serious threat and what treatments are needed to save their hedges.

Methods: Information was disseminated five ways in the last 18 months by: frequent newspaper columns (5); public meetings (4); a youtube video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q4Ze-Sc9Baw> in collaboration with Lee County Extension and; posters were displayed at a Saturday Farmers’ Market and; on-line fact sheets (<http://tinyurl.com/274u57y>).

Results: Meeting participants reported: 100% (n=42) knowledge gain in both identifying and treatment. Ninety-five percent also rated the class as “a much needed, necessary community service”. A post class survey was sent to 27 individuals. There were 13 replies. If the whiteflies were to kill their hedges, participants estimated shrub removal and replacement costs at \$5000 (n= 3) and \$10,000 (n=3) and more than \$20,000 for one respondent.

Conclusions: Collier County will be seeing more damage from this whitefly, however the Extension office has been proactive and has initiated public awareness early in the battle.