

Royal Poinciana Caterpillar Lepidoptera: Noctuidae: *Melipotis acontioides*: Doug Caldwell, Commercial Landscape Horticulture



Royal poincianas are one of the most striking trees in full bloom (left). This tree (right) was denuded by these night-time chewers in late September 2006 in Naples. Caterpillars were an annoyance when they swarmed over the pink house.

We are experiencing a “mild” caterpillar outbreak on localized *Delonix regia*, royal poinciana trees on 13th St. N.; Wisconsin St. and Yucca Rd. While this nocturnal feeding caterpillar (a cutworm relative) may be attacking a few trees, it can be alarming to the homeowner to see thousands of caterpillars moving up the tree trunk at dusk and devouring the leafy canopy. We could hear frass (caterpillar turds) dropping as the larvae munched away about 8:00 PM. To see a video of a recent TV broadcast (10/11/2006) 11:00 NBC 2- TV, go to: http://www.nbc-2.com/homevideofile.asp?videonum=061011_cater.wmv .

These caterpillars grow to about 1¼ inch long in a short period (4-6 weeks?). They crawl like an inchworm (looping motion) and when disturbed, will spring their body up and/or backwards, instead of simply dropping to the ground. They are reported to have several generations and adults (moths) have been found in Jan-March and May-Dec. The caterpillars chew the leaves and drop lots of frass on the ground and spin layers of silken thread on the branches. See page 2 for pictures of different stages. Paper wasps (*Polistes* sp.) are predators and have been seen actively feeding on larvae that aren't very well hidden in the debris on the ground during the day.

This caterpillar feeds in large “herds”. It is reported to feed on plants in the legume family. There is a report of an outbreak royal poinciana in Homestead in 1985. There are reports of outbreaks in Naples 10 to 15 years ago. It is also reported to feed on these small trees: *Parkinsonia aculeata* (Jerusalem thorn), *Poeppegia procera* and a member of the Euphorbiaceae, *Jatropha gossypifolia*, none of these plants are native.

What to Do

It isn't known how detrimental complete defoliation of these trees will be. There isn't much information about this insect. Apparently outbreaks are infrequent, every 10 to 15 years or so. At this point, we are taking a wait and see approach. Because they travel up the trunk nightly, the trunk could be wrapped with a layered cloth or floppy burlap band that they would hide in. This could be changed daily and the larvae placed in a soapy water solution. The base of the tree could be sprayed with a pyrethroid insecticide that is labeled for landscape pest management. There is no reason to spray the entire canopy.

Doug Caldwell, Ph.D., is the Commercial Landscape Horticulture educator with IFAS/UF Coop. Ext. Serv., an off-campus branch of the Univ. of Florida, IFAS (Institute of the Food and Agricultural Sciences) and a department of the Public Services Div. of Collier Co. government. E-mail, dougbug@ufl.edu or call 239-353-4244 x203. Extension programs are open to all persons without regard to race, color, creed, sex, handicap or national origin. For updates on the Southwest Florida Horticulture Learning Center and more landscape pest management details, visit <http://collier.ifas.ufl.edu>.

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Full grown larva ready to go shopping (above).
Larvae on trunk 20 minutes after sunset (right).



Adult of *Melipotis acantioides*, the royal poinciana caterpillar. Photo by Jim Vargas purloined from:
<http://mothphotographersgroup.msstate.edu/Files/Live/Species/8000/8610.shtml>



Caterpillars congregated on trunk; note webbing along right side of trunk. All of the dark spots are dead larvae (below), that were possibly sprayed with an insecticide.



2737 13th St. N on October 5, 2006.

