Creatures that attack citrus in Northwest Florida

Growing citrus in the home landscape has become very popular in Northwest Florida. If the right variety is chosen and is planted in the right spot, gardeners can be rewarded with plump, juicy fruits. Many people enjoy home-grown citrus, and so do many insects. While some may look menacing, most common ones are merely annoying.

**Giant swallowtail**
The giant swallowtail is one of the largest and most beautiful butterflies in our area. Its larval stage or caterpillar is known as the orange dog. It gets this unusual common name because it feeds on the young foliage of citrus trees.

The orange dog is a very unique looking caterpillar. Mostly brown with some white blotches, it is said to resemble bird droppings more than a caterpillar. When disturbed, it will try to scare you off by extruding two orange horns. It does not sting or burn but contains a very pungent odor and when touched, leaves your hand or finger with a strong smell that is hard to wash off.

This harmless caterpillar can cause widespread defoliation of citrus. If you cannot tolerate their feeding habits, then hand-pick them and try to find an organization or neighbor that will take the caterpillars and rear them into butterflies. In Northwest Florida, contact the Panhandle Butterfly House at [www.panhandlebutterflyhouse.org](http://www.panhandlebutterflyhouse.org). They will provide a home for unwanted orange dogs.

**Citrus leafminer**
Citrus leafminers are tiny moths that lay their eggs on new citrus leaves. Upon hatching, the larvae work their way through the leaf, feeding, leaving a trail (also called a mine) that’s visible as a squiggly line. The mines cause the leaf to curl. On young trees, excessive feeding can retard growth. Citrus leafminers do not

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kill the tree but can cause unsightly damage.

Homeowners with backyard citrus trees can manage their leafminer problem by using horticultural oil sprays labeled for citrus. Use the oil as a preventative measure by targeting new growth. The oil will limit the female laying eggs on the foliage by making the leaf surface slick making it harder for the eggs to stick. Look for one of the year-round or summer horticultural oils. Sprays to control the adults are usually not successful. The following online publication provides additional information on citrus pests, http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/HS141.

**Citrus rust mites**

Citrus rust mites are very tiny arthropods that damage the fruit of many citrus trees. The mites use their piercing-sucking mouthparts to damage the epidermal cells of citrus fruit. The result of their feeding is surface blemishes, reduced fruit size and increased fruit drop.

Adult citrus rust mites are light yellow, tan, red, or pink. Their bodies are elongated and wedge-shaped, and difficult to see with the naked eye. They might be mistaken for tiny spiders.

When they attack in summer or fall, the injured surface of the fruit is smooth and dark in color, also referred to as “bronzing.” When the fruit is injured in the spring, damage is lighter in color and is referred to as “sharkskin.”

Since mites tend to avoid direct sun, they primarily feed on the shaded part of the fruit. Therefore, the typical bronzing injury may be found only on one side of the fruit. While it looks horrible, the internal quality of the fruit is unaffected and the peeled fruit is edible.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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