

Friday's Feature

By

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Orange and black caterpillars usher in autumn

Along Florida's northern Gulf Coast, orange and black caterpillars are dining on local plants. Two very different orange caterpillars are present. One is the Gulf fritillary butterfly larva and the other is the oleander caterpillar. They are different in many respects, but they look very similar.

The Gulf fritillary is a beautiful orange and silver butterfly. It is probably the most common butterfly seen in Northwest Florida in early autumn. Its larval stage, or caterpillar, is bright orange with numerous black spines.

The Gulf fritillary female lays small yellow eggs singly on or near leaves, stems or tendrils of several different types of passionflower vines. Larvae may feed on all parts of the plant and can rapidly defoliate host vines. However, because this is a desirable butterfly, control of the caterpillar is not recommended and is discouraged.

The oleander caterpillar, however, is not a desired insect. It is a pest that feeds on oleander and several other popular ornamental plants including bougainvillea and mandevilla.

The life cycle of this pest is the same as butterflies. The adult is an unusual looking moth. It looks more like a wasp than your typical moth, thus its common name the "polka-dot wasp moth". It is bluish-purple with white dots on black wings. Female moths lay oval, light yellow eggs on the undersides of leaves of its host plants. Upon hatching, the young caterpillars first eat their shells, and then begin feeding on the underside of the leaf. Fully grown caterpillars are usually about an inch long.

The oleander caterpillar is bright orange with tufts of long black hairs. While the hairs may seem menacing, they are not urticating (stinging) and handling the caterpillars will not produce pain unlike certain other hairy caterpillars.

Early infestation by the oleander caterpillar is easy to recognize. The young, gregariously feeding caterpillars turn the new oleander shoots a light brown color due to their skeletonizing feeding behavior (leaving the major and minor leaf veins untouched while eating the tissue in between). At this stage the insect is very easy to control. If caterpillars are allowed to grow beyond the small, gregarious stage, they can

inflict a lot of unsightly defoliation on the oleander unless nature or human intervention stops them. Total defoliation will not kill the plant but, if it occurs repeatedly year after year, the plant may be more susceptible to other pests such as scale insects.

A number of control measures are available for leaf eating caterpillar pests. The best control measure is locating and removing eggs prior to hatching. If hatching caterpillars are found products such as malathion can be used. A natural bacterial product, called BT (*Bacillus thuringiensis*), can be used as well. BT is sold under the trade name Thuricide or Dipel. Read and follow the product label directions.

Scouting for this pest is important, it can devour an oleander shrub in a short period of time and is very difficult to control when larvae are larger.

While the Gulf fritillary caterpillar and the oleander caterpillar look similar, they are never found on the same host plants.



Left: The Gulf fritillary butterfly caterpillar (Photo credit: Theresa Friday)

Below: The pest oleander caterpillar (Photo credit: Anne W. Gideon, Bugwood.org)



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

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