Tiny insect can damage sago palms

Notice anything unusual about your sago palm? While it’s the time of year to dress up for Halloween, if your sago looks like it has put on a snowy white costume, something is unquestionably wrong.

Sagos can be infested by more than 20 different types of scale. Scales are insects that are covered by a white, scaly outer covering. While many of these scales can be controlled with little effort, an exotic scale called the cycad aulacaspis scale or Asian cycad scale is a definite and formidable problem for sago palms.

The Asian cycad scale was first found in Florida in 1996. Since its initial discovery in the Miami area, it has become widely distributed in Florida.

Scales are tiny insects. They cover themselves with a waxy coating making them appear white. Once mature they remain stationary. The males are rod shaped, white, and smaller than the females. The female scale is usually pear shaped with a body that is yellow to orange. Eggs present under the scale are orange.

They feed on plant sap through a needle-like mouthpart that is inserted into the fronds, stems or roots of the sago. Damage initially appears as chlorotic (yellowish) spots, but most of the fronds will eventually become brown and withered if not treated. Highly infested sagos are almost completely coated with a white crust that includes scales of live and dead insects. The scale insects are consistently more numerous on the lower surfaces of fronds, and in light infestations they occupy the lower leaf surfaces exclusively.

The first step in trying to control this pest is to wash infested plants with a high-pressure water spray (before any insecticide spray) to dislodge dead and live scales.

Then apply horticultural oil at recommended rates. Ultra-fine paraffin based horticultural oil (like UltraFine Oil™) and fish oil emulsion (like Organocide™) will both give satisfactory results. Be sure to read and follow label directions.

Since the Asian cycad scale infests mostly the lower surfaces of the fronds, the spray must be directed there. Use a stick to lift each frond to spray the lower surface. The scale insects also infest the trunk, so spray it as well. Typically, oils require frequent applications (10 days to 3 weeks apart) but are generally safer and less detrimental to the scale’s
introduced natural enemies.

Greater control can be achieved by mixing oils with a contact insecticide, such as malathion or Sevin. There is no hard evidence on how many times you will need to spray to control this insect. In fact, with heavy scale infestations, control may not be possible.

Removal of heavily infested fronds may reduce population density but should not be done frequently because it may reduce plant vigor. Careful disposal of removed fronds is necessary to avoid spreading scales to other plants.

If multiple, frequent treatments are not an option for you, removing the infested plant could be best. As a replacement, our native Coontie (*Zamia pumila*) has, so far, not been plagued by this pest and may be a good choice.

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.

For additional information about all of the county extension services and other articles of interest go to: http://santarosa.ifas.ufl.edu.