

Tip the Scales



During the late fall and early winter it is fairly easy for us to see our plants that are infested by scale. Scale insects belong to the Order Homoptera. The Order also includes the aphids, cicadas, leafhoppers and treehoppers. Scales are particularly hard to control due to the fact that they have a waxy shell covering the soft parts of their bodies. Various chemical controls have dubious effect on them. Water based controls simply run off their shells like water off a ducks back. Oil based control chemicals work better because they stick to the shell, but the best method is probably to use a systemic poison, if possible.

Scale insects have a very interesting life history. As immatures, they live under their shells and take up plant juices through their short, piercing-sucking mouthparts (proboscis). As they grow larger, they exude more of the wax-like shell from special cells in their bodies. The soft body is well protected by this "armor". They do have legs at this stage, but, since they do not move around, the legs are almost useless.

Once mature, scale insects become reproductively active. The males develop wings and can fly about freely after leaving the protection of their scale. The females, on the other hand, are so full of eggs that they cannot get out from under the scale shell. Sort of a self imposed imprisonment, I guess! Males fly about seeking a female, and upon finding one, a mating takes place. The female lays her eggs under the shell and then dies. (I think this mating process has all the makings of a Shakespearian tragedy!) The ova overwinter under the shell and hatch out in the spring. At this point the immatures are called "crawlers" and have full use of their legs. When they find a good spot, or a new plant, they settle down and begin forming a scale over themselves. Then the growth process begins all over again.

An effective non-invasive method of control (If not tedious) is to scrape the egg-laden scales from the plants during the dormant period. Observing those plants that are susceptible to scale, and doing this every season, will ensure that you will have the scale insects under control. We can "tip the scales" on the scale!

