

Two Common Oleander Insect Pests - Early detection can help protect the plant.

Two pests that may shorten the lifespan of oleander or make plants look so sickly that you want to get rid of them are the oleander caterpillar and the false oleander scale. Here is what to look for early, **before** these pest populations build-up. Once you know what to look for, you can become a better plant pest scout and get the bugs picked off or the plants treated before significant damage occurs.



A damaging population of false oleander scales will cause leaves to yellow and eventually defoliate. Photo by Doug Caldwell

False oleander scale (*Pseudaulacaspis cockerelli*)

Look for white specks or larger, clusters of this insect. Hosts include cycads, gardenia, English ivy, magnolia, bischofia, camellia, oleander, palmetto and more than 100 other species. Individual spots are 2-3 millimeters in diameter and are more common on the upper leaf surface. Sometimes a yellow spot will develop where the insects are feeding. These sucking insects can remove enough plant sap to cause defoliation on sensitive species.

The false oleander scale is an armored scale, or a scale with a waxy outer covering much like a shell. The female covering is pear-shaped and shiny white, whereas the male covering is elongated and approximately 1 mm. long. The females deposit eggs under their “shell”. The first instar nymphs, often referred to as “crawlers”, hatch and disperse, then anchor into the plant tissue with their sucking, mosquito-like mouthparts. They do not move to another location once they settle. A generation can be completed in 5 weeks. This scale is sometimes referred to as the oleander scale and as the magnolia white scale.

Target insecticide applications when new leaves start to expand in the spring. At least three applications are needed at 5 to 6 week intervals. Horticultural oil is an excellent, proven product for scale control. Do not settle for some of the newer unproven products that contain fish oil and sesame or various plant oil derivatives. After the scales die, they do not fall off the plant since their body is affixed to the leaves by their threadlike mouthparts. To confirm control, scrape the “shells”. If they are dry and flakey, then the scale is dead.

Oleander caterpillar or polka-dot moth (*Syntomeida epilais jucundissima*)



Leaves are skeletonized by the smaller larvae and consumed to the midrib by the larger ones. Photo by Doug Caldwell



The adult moth is called the polka dot moth and resembles a wasp. This female is depositing eggs on the underside of a leaf. Photo by Doug Caldwell

Although oleander is poisonous when ingested, its toxic chemistry is similar to the digitalis toxin, the oleander caterpillar relishes this plant exclusively.

The adult of the oleander caterpillar is a very attractive moth that resembles a wasp with a red-tipped abdomen and its iridescent bluish/black body and wings that have white spots. Eggs are yellow-green and laid in clusters of 25-75 on the underside of leaves. When larvae hatch, they feed gregariously and skeletonize the leaves. As they grow, they tend to disperse and will consume entire leaves and flower clusters.

The caterpillar is a bright, day-glow orange with black spots and long tufts of black "hair". They pupate in loosely woven cocoons made of silk and tuft hairs. The cocoons are often found in groups in branch crotches or at the base of the trunk near the soil line. Adult moths emerge, mate, lay eggs and die within 9 days. There are at least three generations per year with overlapping of generations. Most feeding activity occurs in the summer months and to some degree in December and March.

Several biorational products that contain the bacterium, *Bacillus thuringiensis*, B.t., are available to help minimize plant damage. B. t. is most effective on smaller caterpillars. Follow label rate instructions carefully as the dose varies depending on the pest species and the size of the caterpillar. Products with permethrin (not pyrethrum) or carbaryl are also effective. Several applications may be needed because there are multiple generations.

Additional information can be found at:

http://www.ifas.ufl.edu/~insect/orn/scales/false_oleander_scale.htm and caterpillar (http://www.ifas.ufl.edu/~insect/orn/ole_cpillar.htm).

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