

PEST ALERT! Pink Hibiscus Mealybug (PHM), *Maconellicoccus hirsutus*

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Don't let the name fool you into complacency. This mealybug will attack not only pink flowering hibiscus, but any flowering hibiscus as well about 200 other species of plants!



Left: Classic "bunchy-top" symptom on new growth caused by PHM. Photo by Doug Caldwell.

Right: Adult (arrow) and immature (nymphs) of the pink hibiscus mealybug. Photo by Marshall Johnson.

Other hosts include citrus, mango, sugarcane, pumpkin, tomato, bougainvillea, croton, oleander, ixora, ficus and numerous weeds. This pest has traveled around the world from its native northern Africa-southeastern Asia to various Caribbean islands. Since its first discovery in 2002, this pest has become well established in south Florida and has killed many hibiscus hedges.

Symptoms: This mealybug injects a toxic saliva as it feeds that causes leaf curling and shortened internodes leading to an appearance termed "bunchy top" and eventually leads to death of the plant. A heavy black sooty mold may be evident on the leaves. This mold (fungus) grows on the sugary honeydew excretions from the mealybug.

Identification. PHM does not have white waxy projections, no long "tails" nor does it have faint longitudinal stripes on its "back" It is lightly covered with a whitish colored powder and has an obvious pink colored body. When squashed, a pink to red fluid is discharged and that is unique for this species. It is important that the general public is aware of plant symptoms and also how to distinguish this species from the other common species such as coconut mealybug, citrus mealybug, longtailed mealybug, etc. To identify some of these see: <http://www.mrec.ifas.ufl.edu/iso/Mealybugs.htm> .

There are several lady beetles and tiny wasps that attack this pest. One parasitic wasp from the mealybug's home country is being released by APHIS (USDA's Animal Plant Health and Inspection Service) in areas where confirmed infestations have been reported.

WHAT TO DO: If you find a suspect PHM infestation, call the PHM helpline, 888-397-1517. They will send the local Div. Plant Industries Inspector to release the parasitic wasps, at no cost! **DO NOT CLIP INFESTED PLANTS TO SHOW ANYONE.** That could spread the insects to new properties. Avoid spraying foliage as that will kill the beneficial insects. Use a systemic root drench of Bayer Advanced Tree & Shrub Insect Control or Merit (imidocloprid). Severely stunted branches may need to be pruned following the soil drench treatment to induce new growth. Also see: <http://creatures.ifas.ufl.edu/orn/mealybug/mealybug.htm> .

For more information on home gardening, contact the Collier County Extension Service, Master Gardener Plant Clinic, at 353-2872. If you have a specimen that you want identified, the Extension Plant Clinic at 14700 Immokalee Rd. is open Monday, Wednesday and Friday, 9 a.m. to noon and 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. E-mail: dougbug@ufl.edu or call 353-4244.