

Frangipani for the Bugs: Hornworm caterpillars (*Pseudosphinx tetrio*), Rust Disease and more.

Doug Caldwell, UF|IFAS Collier County Extension



The flashy larva of the tetrio sphinx moth is a striking addition to the garden! Certain varieties of frangipani are susceptible to fungal rust disease (photo on right) that causes premature defoliation.



The 'Princess Victoria' (picture on left) is a mottled flowering variety developed by Joseph I. Rosselli of Kerner, Louisiana. It and many others are sold by Stokes Tropical Nursery in Iberia, La.

The frangipani (also known as temple trees) group goes by the botanical moniker of *Plumeria*, and has seven or eight different species from Central America and the Caribbean. *Plumeria rubra* has 'Emma Bryant' with yellow-tinged, rose-red blooms and 'Hilo beauty' has currant-red flowers. The *Plumeria rubra* subspecies, *lutea* has yellow flowers often blushed with pink on the outside. Check out the web sites below for some of the newer and really exciting varieties.

The lemon to gardenia-like fragrant and waxy flowers are strung together to make Hawaiian leis. Frangipani are members of the dogbane family (Apocynaceae) and will grow in a wide range of well-drained soils. Some varieties will grow to 25 feet with an equal spread. However, there are some dwarf varieties. 'Dwarf Pink' from Stokes Tropicals, a nursery in Iberia, LA., reportedly tops out at six feet and is evergreen. Speaking of evergreen, that is one issue with these handsome plants. Many will lose their leaves, which are few to begin with, in the winter or whenever there is a dry spell. This leafless, stubby tree is not considered especially desirable, so you may want to plant it in a location where it will not be the showcase plant of the landscape.

As far as pests go, frangipani, don't seem to be bothered on a frequent basis by many pests. However, there are reports of attacks by Florida red scale, lesser snow scale and 7 other armored type scales as well as 12 soft scale species including 3 species in the dangerous wax scale group and the green scale.

A rust (fungus) disease, *Coleosporium plumeria*, can defoliate certain varieties every year. Remove infected leaves or apply propiconazole or Bayleton fungicides as leaves start to show the rusty yellow pustules to minimize this disease. Repeated applications will be needed, probably 3 or 4 applications at 2 to 3 week intervals. If the disease is minimized, the leaves stay on the plant and produce more carbohydrates which will result, perhaps, in more flowers being produced the next season.

Another dimension to gardening with frangipani was revealed this year, with several calls in mid-September about giant caterpillars devouring the leaves. Collecting the larvae of the tetro sphinx, (*Pseudosphinx tetrio*) was an entomologist's delight! These hawkmoth larvae stand out with their boldly alternating black velvet and yellow bands, red head and orange legs and a one inch long wiry "tail" that wags like a little puppy. At one property, about forty or more of these 5 to 6 inch caterpillars, resembling escapees from a Dr. Seuss story, were dangling from a shredded frangipani shrub. The adult is a large, drab (gray-brown) hawkmoth. Anticipating the appearance of this caterpillar alone is worth nurturing a few frangipani in your landscape! A few caterpillars are fun, but be on the lookout, as they may completely defoliate these plants. Either hand-pick larvae when they are small or use a biorational ("soft" pesticide) product that contains spinosad or B.t.

Doug Caldwell is a Certified Arborist and the commercial horticulture extension agent with the University of Florida Collier County Extension Service. The Cooperative Extension Service is an off-campus branch of the University of Florida, Institute of the Food and Agricultural Sciences and a department of the Public Services Division of Collier County government. E-mail dougbug@ufl.edu; call (239) 252-4800. Extension programs are open to all persons without regard to race, color, creed, sex, handicap or national origin.