Helpline Happenings – December 2023

OHHH…CHRISTMAS TREE!

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It's that time of year: when we celebrate the holidays by decorating our homes with boughs, branches, and whole trees! Therefore, it is timely to share information about the additional ornaments that can come into the house thanks to winter greens.

Real Christmas trees are grown outdoors (surprise!) and like other living outdoor trees, they may harbor overwintering insects and other arthropods. Believe it or not, retail lots often have tree shakers which vigorously shake a tree to dislodge some of the arthropods, but egg masses and bird nests, which may contain bird mites, are often left behind. These residents, when brought indoors and exposed to warm indoor temperatures, may wake up and become active.

Some more common hitchhikers that may come indoors with the holiday greens are Spotted Lanternfly egg masses, adelgids, aphids, mantis egg cases, scale, and spiders.

- **Spotted Lanternfly (SLF) egg mass:** We are familiar with the mud-like construction of SLF egg masses, but we may not notice them until they have hatched. But then we definitely notice them!



Spotted Lanternfly egg mass (left) and Nymph (right)

- **Adelgids:** Are tiny, aphid-like insects. While we may be familiar with Hemlock Wooly Adelgid, there is also a Pine Bark Adelgid. As adelgids feed, white flocking secretions are left on the needles, twigs, or bark of the tree. Not to worry, adelgids will not leave the tree or branches so they will not infest the house.



Pine Bark Adelgid

- **Aphids:** The giant conifer aphids can be up to 1/8 inch long and are among the largest native aphids in North America. There are at least 152 species in North America, and they can be found on most species of conifer. The first hatching is wingless, but if the Christmas tree remains indoors for an extended period, especially if it is live with a root ball, they will produce winged offspring. The balsam twig aphid is gray-green and is found especially on Frasier and balsam firs. Generally speaking, aphids are very host specific, so they won't run amok in the kitchen or eat your house plants.




Winged (left) and wingless (right) Giant Conifer Aphid



Balsam Twig Aphid

- **Mantis egg case:** If you ever have a mantis egg mass hatch indoors you will discover dozens of baby mantises scattering through the house. There are only 20 mantises native to the US, and over 2400 worldwide. Regrettably, ALL the mantids here in Mercer County (the Chinese, the European and the Carolina) are not native to the region. The egg cases are easily visible. To prevent hatching, cut out the branch with an egg case and set it out to overwinter in your garden.




Carolina Mantis egg case (left) and Chinese Mantis egg case (right)

- **Pine needle scale:** This scale overwinters as eggs, but with warmth and extended time indoors, the crawlers will emerge in a couple of weeks and crawl on the tree, floor, and walls near the tree.



Pine Needle Scale Crawlers

- **Spiders:** Webbing on the branches could indicate a spider has come in with the tree.



Spider Web

Management:

- Once your tree is inside, all controls should be limited to non-chemical means.
- Aerosol insect sprays are often flammable and should not be sprayed on a Christmas tree.
- All these creatures are easily dealt with by vacuuming.
- Most likely these critters will die due to dry indoor heating and lack of food.

And be glad you don't live where there are…

SNAKES!! This is the scourge of our southern hemisphere neighbors. The internet is full of snake stories in Christmas trees in Australia and South Africa, where Christmas happens in summer. Fortunately, this is not a problem here in Mercer County. So, vacuum up your arthropods and count your blessings!

Primary resource: https://extension.psu.edu/insects-on-real-christmas-trees