

Orange dog caterpillars turn into beautiful swallowtail butterflies

The swallowtail is one of the largest and most beautiful butterflies in our area. Its larval stage or caterpillar is known as the orange dog. This unusual name comes from the fact that it feeds on the young foliage of citrus trees.

The orange dog caterpillar is mostly brown with some white blotches, resembling bird droppings more than a caterpillar. When disturbed, it will try to scare you off by extruding two orange horns. It doesn't sting or burn but contains a pungent odor. When touched it may leave your hand or finger with a strong smell that is hard to wash off.

The caterpillar can cause widespread defoliation of citrus. If you cannot tolerate their feeding habits, remove them from the plant and contact the Panhandle Butterfly House at www.panhandlebutterflyhouse.org. They will provide a home for unwanted orange dogs and rear them into butterflies. Theresa Friday, UF/IFAS Extension Agent in Santa Rosa County, is a co-author of today's article and helps operate the Panhandle Butterfly House. The Panhandle Butterfly House is located in Navarre.

Another common insect found on local citrus trees is the citrus leafminer. The adult is a tiny moth which lays its eggs on young, tender citrus leaves. Upon hatching, the flat larvae work their way through the leaf, feeding, leaving a trail (also called a mine) that's visible as a squiggly line. The mines cause the leaf to curl. On young trees, excessive feeding can retard growth. Citrus leafminers do not kill the tree but can cause unsightly damage.

Homeowners with backyard citrus trees can manage their leafminer problem by using horticultural oil sprays labeled for citrus. Use the oil as a preventative measure by targeting new growth. The oil will limit the female laying eggs on the foliage by making the leaf surface slick making it harder for the eggs to stick. Look for one of the year-round or summer horticultural oils. Sprays to control the adults are usually not successful. The following online publication provides additional information on citrus pests, <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/HS141>.

Our May plant clinic will be held Wednesday, May 26 from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. in Fort Walton Beach at the Okaloosa County Extension Service building, 127 W. Hollywood Blvd.

If you have a plant problem, including citrus tree problems, that you'd like diagnosed, bring a sample of the weed, plant, insect, etc., to the clinic. Be sure to bring a fresh sample that represents what is seen in the landscape. This may include a plant stem with several leaves, a 4-inch square of grass with roots attached, etc.

Larry Williams, UF/IFAS Extension Agent, Okaloosa County, May 20, 2010