Beetles killing pines, control is limited

Many people are noticing dead or dying pines. Closer inspection reveals evidence of pine bark beetle attack on many of these pines.

Pine beetles are secondary invaders, attacking pines that are already injured, damaged or stressed. Pines have suffered major stress due to the high hurricane winds in 2004 and 2005 as well as periods of flooding (spring of 2005) and periods of prolonged drought, including this spring. Lightening strikes, damage that occurs during developing lots and subdivisions, even the use of some lawn herbicides and irrigating too much can all result in weak, injured pines.

Pine beetle activity is expected following storms like Ivan and Dennis or following droughts. These beetles are only doing their job - taking out the "weak." We can't prevent these events. We possibly can prevent some manmade injuries that result in pines becoming more vulnerable to beetle attack.

Ips engraver beetles and black turpentine beetles infest pines as a direct result of construction injury. This can occur after construction of a new subdivision or home where existing pines were injured from raising or lowering the grade, where roots were paved over, where water movement was altered, where there is compaction from heavy equipment, etc. This type of injury is prevented, not cured. Many pines have a poor chance of surviving long-term on new home sites.

Some species of pines do not cope well in an urban landscape. Fertilizer, excessive irrigation, weed killers and other lawn chemicals weaken pines. Pines are doomed to live a shorter life in a landscape as compared to pines in a natural wooded environment, left undisturbed.

Preventing pine beetle attack may also involve quickly removing a pine that has been injured from lightning, wind breakage, etc. An injured tree is a "sitting duck" for beetle attack.

Insecticides have a place in bark beetle management but it’s a rather limited place.

Once beetles are in a tree, it's too late to use an insecticide. And it's a matter of time before the tree dies. Insecticides may be used to protect high value pines prior to attack, which are in close proximity to infested trees.

Currently available insecticides for pine beetle control are limited and costly. You may find a professional strength permethrin product but probably not. A newer product called Onyx containing bifenthrin is somewhat available but costs in the neighborhood of $110 - $160 per quart.
Insecticides do not remove the source of stress that attracted bark beetles to the location in the first place. It can be difficult and dangerous to spray a plant as large as a pine tree.

Visit http://eny3541.ifas.ufl.edu for more information.

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