

Crape Myrtle Bark Scale

By Deborah Birge, Fort Bend County Master Gardener

Until recently, the most discussed Crape Myrtle issue has been “Crape Murder”, the practice of chopping off the tops of Crape Myrtle trees. We now have a new threat to what has been a relatively pest-free beauty in our landscapes, Crape Myrtle Bark Scale (*Lagerstroemia*), and invasive insect from Asia.

Crape Myrtle Bark Scale was discovered in Texas in 2004 and spread quickly. The homeowner usually notices a black coloring on the trunk and twigs called “sooty mold”, which is a black mold growing on honeydew excreted by the bark scale. Adult females are felt-like white or gray encrustations that stick to twigs and trunks (see photo). When crushed, these scales exude a pink, blood-like liquid. CMBS are usually found on the underside of twigs, preferring shade to sunlight.



“Crawlers”, as the nymphs are called, resemble aphids and can be seen moving on the branches.

Although Crape Myrtles rarely die as a result of a CMBS infestation, the sticky leaves and black trunks greatly reduce the attractive appearance of the tree. (Aphids are another common pest sometimes found on the leaves and can also be a source of honeydew. Please note that this honeydew attracts sooty mold fungus, but only on the leaves.)

Controlling CMBS

- If your tree is heavily infested, wash the trunk and reachable limbs with a soft brush and mild **solution of dishwashing soap and water**. This will remove many of the female scales and egg masses, making insecticide control more effective. Washing will also remove much of the black mold on the bark.
- It may be beneficial to apply **horticultural oil** in the winter at dormant-season rates to the bark and crotches of the trees. Use enough oil to reach behind loose bark and into cracks and crevices.
- **Systemic insecticides** have shown the most promise in tests to date. Apply them to the root zone as a soil injection or drench. The best control was achieved between May and July by applications of clothianidin, dinotefuran (Greenlight Tree and Shrub Insect Control with Safari), imidacloprid (Merit or Bayer Advanced Garden Tree and Shrub Insect Control), and thiamethoxam (Meridian). Allow several weeks for the systemic insecticide to be absorbed throughout the tree. *Please note that the systemic drenches described above are neonicotinoids, which have been cited as detrimental to bees. So, although the drenches are very effective against this scale, they should be used with caution, and ONLY once per year.*
- Some **lady beetle species**, especially the twice-stabbed lady beetle, are beneficial insects that are predators of this scale and can clean up the bark. (See photo)



If you have a light infestation, scrubbing the tree with soapy water then applying horticulture oil (starting from September through mid-April) should provide adequate control by smothering the crawlers

If you have a heavy infestation and prefer to use the drench, it is recommended you use it in May through July. To mitigate damage to bees, you can remove any blooms during that time.

None of the above methods will completely eradicate CMBS, so you should check your tree at least once a month. If you see new crawlers, spray your tree with a strong stream of soapy water (one tablespoon of soap in a 1-gallon hose-end sprayer), then apply oil. Do not use oil after the temperature reaches a consistent 85 degrees.

<https://agrillifeextension.tamu.edu/library/landscaping/crape-myrtle-bark-scale-a-new-exotic-pest/>

Fort Bend County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who assist Texas A&M Agrilife Extension Service in educating the community using research-based horticultural information.

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