

# Gardeners' Q&As for September

*Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office*



September 9, 2020



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*News column printed in the Galveston Daily News, The Post, and other Galveston County Newspapers.*



**PHOTO CREDIT: William M. Johnson**

When people think of stinging insects, they typically think of bees and wasps, not caterpillars. However, there are several species of caterpillars that sting including lo caterpillars (*pictured*).

**Q:** There are several lime-green colored caterpillars feeding on the leaves of my oak tree. What are they and what can I spray to control them?

**A:** Caterpillars of all kinds make an appearance during the summer. Armyworms, webworms and orange dog caterpillars are all generating calls to the office. Some of these are ferocious looking, but are harmless if

handled. However, there are a few that, if touched, will get your immediate attention. Stinging caterpillars can be found on a variety of landscape plants.

When people think of stinging insects, they typically think of bees and wasps, not caterpillars. However, there are several species of caterpillars that sting. They usually show up at this time of year and are most often found feeding

on the leaves of trees and shrubs. Stinging caterpillars are likely to be more common this year than usual because of the unusually mild winter.

While there are several species of stinging caterpillars that occur in our area, the lo caterpillar is the most reported thus far.

They are referred to as stinging caterpillars but





they do not possess stingers like honey bees and wasps. Stinging caterpillars have spines that are connected to poison glands. When touched, the tips of the spines break and release the poisonous chemicals which serve as a chemical defense mechanism to protect it from predators.

Many caterpillars have spine-like projections that resemble stinging caterpillars but are harmless. There are no general characteristics that differentiate these from the stinging types, so it's best to leave them alone or learn to identify them and know their host plants.

In general, don't handle caterpillars if you are unsure of their identity. Io moth caterpillars may reach 2 to 2.5 inches long. They are a striking chartreuse green color with well-defined red and white stripes running the length of their bodies.

Distinct groups of long yellow or green spines tipped in black cover most of the body of an Io caterpillar. Io caterpillars have voracious appetites and can quickly strip leaves from host plants. They feed on more than 100 recorded plants, including oaks, azaleas, roses, corn, elm, hibiscus, willow, ixora and palms.

Io caterpillars feed side-by-side as a family group in their early stages of growth and entire leaves can be consumed in a short time period. If control is needed, spray young caterpillars with insecticides containing *Bacillus thuringiensis* as an ac-

tive ingredient (such as Dipel or BT). Older/larger caterpillars should be sprayed with insecticides containing carbaryl as an active ingredient (such as Sevin). If you would like to control these mechanically, remove them carefully with forceps and dump them into a container of warm soapy water.

If you are the recipient of contact by a stinging caterpillar, use adhesive tape to remove spines and apply ice packs to reduce stinging. A paste of baking soda and water will also help reduce the stinging.

A person with a history of allergic reactions, hay fever or asthma should contact a physician. Initial reaction to a stinging caterpillar is severe burning and pain, numbness, and swelling in the affected area. In addition to intense pain, you may experience difficulty with speech and breathing. Allergic reactions may include nausea, vomiting, fever, shock and convulsions.

As a precaution, look before pruning or reaching into plants, and learn to identify stinging caterpillars in our area.

**Q: I was pruning my oleanders and developed a skin contact rash soon after handling the pruned branches. Then two days later I got covered in spots and a rash on both arms. I was wondering if plant reactions tend to happen right away, or can they take a couple of days to present, especially with regard to oleanders.**

A: Most area gardeners know oleanders are quite poisonous but that factor is generally related to ingestion of leaves, seeds or other plant tissue. While sensitivity to the oleander sap is not common, it has been reported.

If you have exhibited sensitivity in the past, I recommend wearing gloves, long sleeved shirts and full-length pants when pruning oleanders. If you were pruning during the warmer part of the day, sweat would tend to aggravate the spread of sap on the skin. Similar to rash development after exposure to poison ivy, people with sensitivities to the sap of fresh-cut oleanders can develop rashes in a matter of a few hours or as long as several days after contact.

Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health care professional regarding medical treatment.

