UF UNIVERSITY of FLORIDA
IFAS Extension

Oleander Caterpillar (*Syntomeida epilais*)

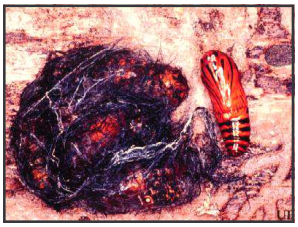
Introduced: Native of the Caribbean.

Current Infestation: The oleander caterpillar is found throughout Florida and coastal regions of southeastern states wherever oleander is grown.

Description/Biology: The female moth will lay egg clusters on the underside of young leaves. They are pale cream to light yellow in color, very small, and round.

Caterpillars are bright orange with tufts of long black hairs. They usually feed in groups on the underside of leaves, progressively, ultimately consuming the entire leaf. Oleander caterpillars do not have stinging hairs.

Pupae are smooth and brown in Appearance, and are aggregated in depressions on tree trunks where they are covered by a thin silken cocoon. Sometimes they are found under the eaves of buildings.



Adults of the oleander caterpillar are sometimes called the polka-dot wasp moth or the Uncle Sam moth. These moths are very distinctive and active during the day. Their body and wings are a beautiful iridescent blue/green. Small white dots are found on the body, wings, legs and antennae, and the tip of the abdomen is red/ orange.

The oleander caterpillar can be confused with the Gulf fritillary caterpillar, however, Gulf fritillary caterpillars are never found on the same host plants of the oleander caterpillar. Also Gulf fritillary caterpillars have spike-like projections instead of soft, hair-like bristles.

Seasonality: Found year-round in south Florida and the Keys.

Hosts: Oleander (*Nerium oleander)* and desert rose (*Adenium obesum*). Also reported on bougainvillea, Natal plum (*Carissa grandiflora*), rubber vine *(Echites umbellate)*, and mandevilla.

Oleander

Desert rose

Oleander Caterpillar (*Syntomeida epilais*)

Importance: Oleander caterpillars can cause significant defoliation of oleander and desert rose. It is the only caterpillar pest of concern on oleander, although a related species, the spotted oleander caterpillar (*Empyreuma affinis*) may be found occasionally in south Florida and the Keys.

Damage: Early infestations by the oleander caterpillar are easy to recognize. The young, gregariously feeding caterpillars skeletonize the new foliage turning it a light brown color. This is the best time to control this pest. If the caterpillars are allowed to grow beyond this young stage, they can defoliate their host plant. Total defoliation will not kill the plant, however, if severe damage occurs year after year, the plant may be more susceptible to other pest or disease problems.

Management: There are several natural enemies that include stink bugs, tachinid flies, wasps, and the red imported fire ant that attack this pest. Also, viral, fungal and bacterial diseases can cause significant caterpillar mortality. Infected larvae are often dark in color, flaccid, and easily "liquified". Leaving infected caterpillars on the plant will allow the disease to spread to other caterpillars. Removal of caterpillar-infested foliage is the most environmentally-friendly method of controlling the oleander caterpillar and is relatively easy on smaller bushes. Prune off infested leaves or hand collect the caterpillars, and dispose in the garbage. Wear gloves when handling oleander because its sap is very poisonous.

There are no oleander cultivars that are resistant to the oleander caterpillar but it has been suggested that dwarf cultivars may be less susceptible.

Homeowner and Professional - Application of insecticides should be considered as a last resort for this insect. *Bacillus thuringiensis* (B.t.), a microbial insecticide that is sold under various trade names (Dipel, Thuridicide, etc.) is a bacterium that kills only caterpillars that feed on treated foliage. This product is readily available at garden centers.

Grower - Pesticides that can be used include acephate (i.e. Orthene), bifenthrin (i.e. Talstar), carbaryl (Sevin), cyfluthrin (Decathlon), spinosad (Conserve), and tebufenozide (Confirm). Many of these pesticides will also affect the natural enemies. When possible use B.t. as described above.

Websites:

http://creatures.ifas.ufl.edu/orn/ole_cpillar.htm

http://creatures.ifas.ufl.edu/orn/spotted_oleander_caterpillar.htm

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