

Cactus Moth (*Cactoblastis cactorum*)

Introduced: First U.S. report was in 1989 (Monroe County). Native to South America.

Current Infestation: Cactus moths can be found throughout Florida, and continues to spread through the Atlantic and Gulf Coast states.

Description/Biology: The cactus moth life cycle is approximately 90 days. Eggs are laid on cactus pads in a stacked formation creating an egg stick that resembles a cactus spine.



Larvae hatch from the eggs and burrow into the cactus pad generally close to the egg stick.

Larvae are bright orange red with large dark spots forming transverse bands. The larvae feed in groups inside cactus pads. During feeding, the caterpillar excrement is pushed out of the cactus pad and forms a noticeable pile. The larvae exit the cactus pad to pupate, forming white cocoons in leaf litter, in bark crevices of nearby trees, or in the soil.



Adults are grayish-brown with a wing span of $\frac{3}{4}$ to $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches (2.2 to 3.5 cm).



Seasonality: Cactus moths can usually be found all year in Florida, however, there are at least three generations per year with peak adult flights in the spring, summer, and fall.

Hosts: Most species of prickly pear cacti (*Opuntia* spp.) including six Florida native *Opuntia* species.



Importance: The cactus moth is an effective control agent of *Opuntia* species and was introduced to Australia and other places for this purpose. However, its presence in Florida is a concern because of its impact on the native *Opuntia* species as well as other species grown as ornamental plants in Florida which include the Florida semaphore cactus (*Opuntia corallicola*), the signal cactus (*O. spinosissima*), and *O. tricantha*. The cactus moth is a serious pest of *Opuntia* species in farms, nurseries, landscapes, and natural areas.

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Damage: Larval feeding causes physical damage by hollowing out and destroying the young cactus pads. This damage allows pathogens to enter the plant which can cause the death of the entire plant.



Management: The best method to manage this pest is through early detection which allows for simple techniques of removing and destroying egg sticks or infested cactus pads.

Homeowner - To remove prickly pear cactus pads without being stuck by their spines, use tongs to hold the pad and cut it off with a large knife or machete.

Place the cut pads in a sunny location, and cover with clear plastic. This will cook the caterpillars that are living in the pads. Another method is to thoroughly crush the infested pads. Then place the pads in a double strength plastic bag for garbage pick up.

Professional and Grower - Monitor plants for egg sticks or feeding damage. If spotted, remove and destroy them. If a pesticide is necessary, it is important to target the young larvae before they burrow into the pad. Contact pesticides labeled for caterpillars (such as pyrethroids) can be successful in controlling these young larvae. In laboratory tests, cypermethrin, spinosad, and imidacloprid provided excellent control of eggs and neonates (larvae that have just hatched from their eggs).

Websites:

<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/IN213>

<http://www.fcla.edu/FlaEnt/fe844.htm>

http://www.aphis.usda.gov/ppq/ep/emerging_pests/cactoblastis/index.html

<http://www.invasivespeciesinfo.gov/animals/controlmech.shtml>

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