

Garden Column for the Salisbury Post

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Silver maple and other trees are being invaded by an unusual white insect called the woolly alder aphid. The arrival of these insects occurs in early summer. Many have concerns about potential damage to the tree and the sticky by-product residues.

These aphids are black with the abdomen covered with a fluffy, white wax. The fluffy wax allows the insect to float in the air like free floating dandelion seeds. The insect must have an alternate host of silver maples and alders (maple family) to complete its life cycle.

The insect is easily recognized by the presence of large, fuzzy, white colonies on the foliage, twigs and bark of silver maple trees. Their alarming presence is more of a nuisance than a detriment to the tree. The insect causes little damage to the host tree. Woolly aphids suck plant juices and secrete a tremendous amount of honeydew. Honeydew is a sticky, sweet substance that drops on cars, sidewalks and drives creating an unpleasant dirty surface. Dark, sooty molds grow on the honeydew disfiguring plants and turf below the tree. The sweet honeydew attracts ants, bees and other flying insects compounding the problem.

Wooly aphids over winter in the cracks and crevices of silver maple bark. Immature aphids, called nymphs, feed on the underside of silver maple leaves in early spring.

All the over wintering aphids are female giving live birth to young, producing large colonies. The offspring then develop wings later in May through July. The winged adults then fly to alder trees. Alder trees are indigenous to the piedmont, growing near creeks or streams. Once these insects reach alders, the aphids feed and sexually reproduce, completing their life cycle.

Control of these insects is generally not practical because of excessive treatment costs. Silver maple trees are not severely damaged by wooly alder aphid infestations. Smaller silver maples may be sprayed to reduce the population. Spray aphid pockets thoroughly at first arrival with insecticidal soap. Silver maples will require two applications, ten days apart.

The wooly aphid population depends upon many factors including: climate, hosts and natural predators. Natural predators usually keep the aphids under control. One of these out of balance will cause increase in populations.

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