

South Florida Sun-Sentinel.com

Whitefly feasting on your ficus? Here's what you should do

Daniel Vasquez

Consumer columnist

September 15, 2008

Another week and the fig whitefly may have devoured my ficus hedge, leaving me with an unpleasant backyard view of a busy four-lane road.

The whitefly is cruel that way — and costly. You can expect to pay hundreds or thousands of dollars to get rid of the pest, depending on the size of your ficus. Our bill: \$800.

Like many in South Florida, I depend on ficus for privacy. And now this winged ficus-eater, believed to have arrived in America a year ago in Miami-Dade County, is steadily feasting its way across Broward and Palm Beach counties.

I got the bad news from Michael Orfanedes a commercial horticulture agent with [Broward County](#) Extension Education who evaluated my hedges.

"We're on the front lines for the whitefly in Florida," he said. "We're still learning what to do."

Here's what I've learned so far: Once you have whitefly, you have to decide how much you *really* want your ficus and how much you'll spend to save it from this voracious creature.

Without insecticide, you could lose your ficus. And unless you catch the problem early, you won't have much time to decide. Large, dense hedges can be stripped in less than two months of infestation.

Here are some questions to consider:

Do I have whitefly?

"If you see even one, you may be infested," said Orfanedes. "If your neighbor has it, you'll get it."

Signs include leaves that are yellow, have white spots and or have fallen in high numbers. Mature flies are a bit bigger than pinheads, easy to miss when sitting still. Try brushing your hand across an area of leaves to stir a bunch of flies, making them easier to notice.

The good news is you can treat and save your ficus even if your neighbor doesn't.

How do I get rid of it?

You can do it yourself or hire someone.

One common over-the-counter product is Bayer Advanced Tree and Shrub Protect and Feed, which can be found at Lowe's, Home Depot and gardening centers (about \$20 for a 32-ounce bottle). One of my neighbors used it and the ficus is whitefly-free, despite being next to a home with hedges stripped bare by the bug

Pest control companies may offer lower prices because they buy chemicals in bulk, but you have to pay for labor.

How much do I need?

Check insecticide labels. The formulas may test your math skills.

Bayer's product calls for three ounces per foot of hedge height multiplied by the number of plants. For a four-foot-tall hedge of 20 plants, you need about 240 ounces (three times four times 20) — or about eight 32-oz. bottles.

How much will it cost?

For the example above, the cost would be about \$160 plus tax.

In my case, it turned out to be cheaper for my wife and me to pay to have the work done than to do it ourselves because of the height (12 feet) and number (more than 150) of plants. For the \$800 (a 25 percent discount for being regular customers), we also got a six-month guarantee.

Drench or spray?

Most experts recommend a procedure called "drenching," which means dousing the roots. That allows the chemicals to pass through the ficus systemically, reaching every leaf.

Some companies may recommend spraying insecticide on the leaves because it's cheaper than drenching. But it's also less effective: It's hard to cover every leaf with spray, and rain can wash the chemical away shortly after application. Too much spray can also harm beneficial insects.

How do I find a company?

If you go this way, make sure it's a licensed pest control company you can trust. Ask for recommendations from neighbors or your homeowner's association. Get several estimates and ask whether the companies follow the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences recommendations, which can be found at broward.org/extension. Click on "fig whitefly handout."

Make sure the company has a valid license. Visit MyFlorida.com and click "Licensee Search," or call 850-487-1395 .

Daniel Vasquez can be reached at dvasquez@sunsentinel.com, or 954-356-4219 , or 561-243-6600 , ext. 4219. To see more columns from Daniel Vasquez, go to sunsentinel.com/vasquez.

Read more

Check out Daniel Vasquez's Consumer Talk blog for ways to spend your money wisely, use technology and keep your family safe

SunSentinel.com/consumerblog

See the damage

Copyright © 2008, [South Florida Sun-Sentinel](#)