

OAK LEAF ITCH MITES: *TO BE OR NOT TO BE THIS YEAR?* THAT IS THE QUESTION.

By d Brown, Marais des Cygnes Extension District Master Gardener

Dennis Patton, Johnson County K-State Agent, gives his patented answer of "it depends". This is where his "it depends" answer comes into play. The current thinking in the research community is the itch mite may have a wider host range than just the oak margin gall. Researchers are wondering if it can feed on other species of oak gall larvae, or if there are other host plant species besides the oak. Then we have no way of drawing a correlation between the potential outbreak based on the number of margin galls on the trees, Patton says. And, there appears to be little research being conducted around the country on the itch mite, even though its range has continued to spread, according to our Kansas State University entomologist.



Were you tortured last summer by intense itching bites that mysteriously appeared on your neck, shoulders and back? Here's the rascal that caused the problem.

These little guys are tiny, only about 1/125 inch, and are barely visible to the naked eye. The microscopic itch mites prey on the small fly maggots which cause "leaf edge" galls on pin oak leaves.

These bites normally appear on the upper body because itch mites drop from canopies of infested trees. In 2004 outbreak, the University of Nebraska estimated the number of mites dropping from large pin oaks exceeded 300,000 mites per tree per day. In fact, preliminary research indicates that 16,000 adult female itch mites (potential biters) can emerge from one infected oak leaf and fall to the ground. With a population doubling time of two days, these mites can number in the millions in a short period of time. The oak mite is also carried by the wind, so even though you avoid a pin oak, you cannot be assured of escaping their vicious jaws.

The bite causes a raised, red area with a small, centralized blister that is itchy and painful when scratched. More sensitive individuals have developed chills, fever, fatigue and nausea, or severe allergic skin reactions such as extreme itchiness and swelling. Bites appear 10-16 hours after exposure when they start to itch. Itching lasts up to a week or more.

In the Midwest, oak leaf itch mites emerge in late July and continue through the summer. Bite problems intensify in the fall with increased gardening activities, mainly the handling of mite-infested leaves.

While it's almost impossible to avoid the itch mite, it will help to take the following steps:

- Avoid spending time outdoors where oak trees, particularly the pin oaks,

are known to be infected. Bathing and changing and washing clothes after potential exposure is highly recommended.

- DEET-based repellents provide mixed results. They may fail when relied on for complete protection. Repellants are more effective when used in combination with other protection practices.

Doctors recommend several remedies for relief from the itching. Some of these medications require a physician's prescription:

- Cortisone cream
- Cortisone orally (although rarely needed)
- Claritin 10 mg, daily, or other antihistamines
- Calamine lotion
- Benadryl

Kansas State University has published Bulletin MF2806 on the Oak Leaf Itch Mite, which is available at www.ksre.ksu.edu. Should you download this information, please don't sit under the oak tree to read it!

For more information contact the Marais des Cygnes Extension District in Paola (913-294-4306) or Mound City (913-795-2829). Also, take advantage of the Extension Master Gardener Hotline on Thursday's from 9:00 am – Noon in the Paola Office to get all your gardening and horticulture questions answered. Stop by, give us a call, or email us your questions!