

Loblollies need protection from Southern pine beetles

By Fred Morgan

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Next to oaks and dogwoods, pine trees may be the most common large, woody stem tree that populates our Mid-South landscapes.

Within that class, loblolly pines (*Pinus taeda*) are likely the most prominent and the most common species.

While not enjoying the same venerable reputation as the stately oaks and the flowering dogwoods, loblollies are frequently found and used in utilitarian groups as windbreaks, property line designators and makers of much-sought-after shady spots during our hot months.

Yet, these tall giants also have an enemy that seems to return, if not annually at least frequently, to threaten them and their presence as arboricultural assets. Southern pine beetles, turpentine beetles and ips beetles can all be implicated in seemingly sudden needle browning and subsequent death of entire stands of pines.

It is not uncommon for folks to report looking up one day and seeing an entire group of trees turning brown. It doesn't actually happen overnight, but to many owners, it seems so, when with great surprise they one day glance up to see dead tops and brown needles.

Southern pine beetles may be the most commonly encountered of these boring menaces. They are about 3 millimeters long with rounded abdomens and appear brownish-black in color.

When the bark of infected trees can be peeled back, their egg galleries will be found in serpentine patterns and will be typically full of brown frass (debris) made up of beetle feces and boring dust.

The upcoming warm season can be a prime period for these guys to show up again, because trees weakened and made susceptible by stress factors, like the drought we had at the end of last summer, are prime for attack.

Lightning and mechanical wounding, such as occurs on construction and grading sites,

can also have the same predisposing effect. Once the villain is established onsite, they can march down a row of pines, taking down one tree after the other.

Vigilance is critical to stop this devastation before it can go too far. Arrest and/or containment is a two-part process. Symptomatic and correctly diagnosed trees must be cut down and removed, since cure is unlikely once significant impact is observed (needle browning and presence of brown frass).

Beetles overwinter and lay their eggs in galleries in the wood tissue under the bark. If left, this nearby dead wood can be a launching pad for more damage.

The second part of an effective response is an insecticidal spray program for the adjacent but non-symptomatic trees in the group.

Because most attacked pine groups are large and tall, and because coverage needs to be complete on the trunk and woody branches, it may be necessary to contact a professional tree company with appropriate spraying equipment for this work.

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