

Oak Leaf Itch Mite

In 2016 many Kansans experienced the pain and discomfort of an oak leaf itch mite bite. These microscopic insects had a huge population surge that year and many residents anxiously call our Extension Master Gardener Response Line to see if they will return again this fall. This pest population is highly dependent on a few changing factors leaving the question of their return unknown.

Although the oak leaf itch mite's life is heavily shrouded in mystery, there are a few things we know. Firstly, the name of the mite comes from the oak margin gall, which is caused by another insect (a midge) that the mite feeds on. This food source is the reason many residents experienced the mite bites standing or working under their oak trees. Some residents were so desperate to evade the mites that they wanted to remove their oak trees! These microscopic mites can be carried in the wind for miles so avoiding oak trees won't offer you full proof protection.

The most recent research indicates that in lieu of the oak margin gall, the itch mite will feed on a wide variety of insect hosts. Furniture beetle larvae, rice and granary weevils, oriental fruit moths, pine tip moths and hackberry nipplegall psyllids are all victims of the mite. These are only the species that research has shown the mites feeding on, many more are believed to exist.

Due to the favoritism that the mite shows towards feeding on the margin gall, the presence of this gall can be an indicator of mite populations. By looking for this gall on your oak trees in spring and summer, you may be able to predict if this fall will be another bad year for the mite.

Although food sources are certainly a factor in insect populations, there are many other factors we cannot measure. Temperature, rainfall and humidity can have significant impacts on the itch mite in its development and reproduction. Although we can measure these influences as the season progresses, we are not sure how they affect the oak leaf itch mite's life cycle.

Residents who have experienced the painful rash and bumps left behind by the mite are often desperate for a solution. In that area as well, research is still catching up. There are no known sprays to effectively control oak leaf itch mites. Some products that are labeled for "mites" and have been sold under the guise of oak leaf itch mite control. Those products are a waste of time, money and may cause unintentional damage to other insects and the environment.

Effective controls rely primarily on covering your head and neck from open exposure. The mites blow in the wind or fall from the trees so your head, neck and arms are the most likely targets for bites. Long sleeves, hats (especially wide brimmed), and pants are all highly recommended. Gloves can also help as will anything that covers your skin. DEET-based repellants are sometimes effective. The best results with these repellants occur when they are used in combination with protective clothing.

After you've been in your garden, change and wash your clothes immediately. Bathe as soon as you can and leave your garden shoes outside. Another, more obvious solution; limit time under or near oak trees.

If you are bitten by the mites, try not to scratch as this can cause infection. Consult your doctor for creams or prescriptions that may alleviate some of the pain.

Insect populations fluctuate every year. Last summer we had enormous amounts of painted lady butterflies. These beautiful butterflies covered entire bushes and yards! With the good, so comes the

bad. We are likely to see another outbreak of the oak leaf itch mites in the next few years. By then, research may have advanced enough to provide us with more control methods. Until then, keep an eye on the oaks and don't forget your hat!