

South Florida Pest Alert: The Fig Whitefly, *Singhiella simplex*

What is attacking my ficus trees and hedges?

The new pest fig whitefly, *Singhiella simplex*, is probably the main culprit. It was first observed in Miami-Dade County in late 2007. It has been attacking trees in the *Ficus* genus, mainly South Florida's most popular ficus, the weeping ficus tree (*Ficus benjamina*). Another pest that has been attacking weeping ficus tree, since 2003, is the weeping ficus thrips, *Gynaikothrips uzeli*. The good news is that what you use to control the fig whitefly will also control the weeping ficus thrips.

What are the signs or symptoms of fig whitefly infestation?

One of the most obvious symptoms is sparse foliage. The foliage turns yellow before it drops. Another symptom is when the foliage is disturbed or touched, you can see the tiny whiteflies flying away from the foliage. Another sign of infestation are silver to white spots located on the underside of the foliage. These spots are the old, empty skins of immature whiteflies.

What are the host plants for the fig whitefly?

The fig whitefly attacks plants in the *Ficus* genus such as the weeping ficus/fig tree (*F. benjamina*), false banyan or council tree (*F. altissima*), "banyan tree" (*F. bengalensis*), Cuban laurel (*F. microcarpa*), banana leaf fig (*F. maclellandii*) and the two native *Ficus* species, strangler fig (*F. aurea*) and shortleaf fig (*F. citrifolia*).

How do I treat or control the fig whitefly?

The best recommendation is to apply a systemic insecticide. Two very popular systemic insecticides that are not restricted pesticides and can be found over-the-counter in stores, such as Home Depot and Lowe's, are *Bayer Advanced Tree & Shrub Insect Control* (do not use near water) and *Spectricide Systemic Tree & Shrub Insect Control*. Both of these come in a liquid form and are applied as a root drench. The Bayer product uses the commercial product *Merit* and the Spectricide product uses the commercial product *Safari*. There are many Bayer products that look similar so make sure it has Merit written on the label. The Bayer product also comes in a powder form but it is not as fast acting as the liquid form and more difficult to apply. These systemic insecticides can work and protect the tree for 9-12 months (according to Bayer's label) before needing to be reapplied; whereas most spray insecticides typically only kill pests in the short term usually at the time of application. So, if your neighbors don't treat their *Ficus* sp. then you have a high chance of reinfestation with the use of sprays.

Sprays are also not recommended because they are more harmful to beneficial insects than systemic root drenches. Only the insects that eat the foliage and other plant parts will die when using a systemic root drench. The sprays can kill all the insects it contacts. The sprays are also more difficult to apply, especially in tall, dense hedges since the fig whiteflies are generally on the underside of the foliage. The sprays may be cheaper per application than the systemic drenches; however, in the long run the sprays may be more costly since they need to be reapplied more frequently like on a weekly to monthly basis.

Just remember when using pesticides follow the label's directions since "The label is the law".

Another option is to remove the *Ficus* sp. and to replant with another type of shrub. Some possible native plant substitutions are: cocoplum (*Chrysobalanus icaco*), firebush (*Hamelia patens*), Florida privet (*Forestiera segregata*), golden dewdrop (*Duranta repens*), seagrape (*Coccoloba uvifera*), green buttonwood (*Conocarpus erectus*), silver buttonwood (*Conocarpus erectus* var. *sericeus*), Spanish stopper (*Eugenia foetida*), white indigo berry (*Randia aculeata*) and wild coffee (*Psychotria nervosa*). Some exotic plant alternatives are: croton (*Codiaeum variegatum*), chenille plant (*Acalypha hispida*), natal plum (*Carissa macrocarpa*), blue plumbago (*Plumbago auriculata*), snowbush (*Breynia disticha*), Texas sage (*Leucophyllum frutescens*) and Thryallis (*Galphimia gracilis*).

Who do I contact for more information or publications?

For photos and more detailed information you can contact, Mark Torok, your local Florida Division of Forestry State Forester (serving Palm Beach, Broward, Miami-Dade & Monroe counties) at (954) 475-4194 or torokm@doacs.state.fl.us. You can also contact your local University of Florida IFAS County Extension offices: Broward – phone 954-370-3725, website- <http://broward.org/extension>, Miami-Dade - phone 305-248-3311, website- <http://miami-dade.ifas.ufl.edu/>, Palm Beach – phone 561-233-1700, website- <http://palm-beach.ifas.ufl.edu/>, and Monroe 305-292-4501, website- <http://monroe.ifas.ufl.edu/>.

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