

Post-Harvest Pests on Christmas Trees

CONSUMER INFORMATION

Unwanted Hitchhikers

Unfortunately, your real Christmas tree may have an unwanted hitchhiker. There are several kinds of insects that spend the winter in conifers such as Fraser fir. If you are an insect, a Christmas tree provides a well-protected place to live through the cold and snow of winter months. When you bring the tree into your home, they think spring has come and become active again, even reproducing in the home. A similar situation occurs when you leave houseplants outside on the patio in the summer then bring them back inside. They may harbor spiders, sow bugs, earthworms, earwigs, or some other creature that has found a safe place to live. In Christmas trees, pests such as *Cinara* aphids, spider mites, and praying mantid egg cases may be found. Fortunately, with Christmas trees, these unwanted hitchhikers do not bite or cause disease. Like ants at a picnic, they are just a nuisance. In many ways these hitchhikers are a symptom of a fresh tree recently harvested.

Rarely Occur

Most years, these pests are rare. Only about one tree in 100,000 has any one of these pests on it. They are more common when it is still warm when trees are cut.

Not the Grower's Fault

Should the growers have treated for these pests? Unfortunately, they didn't even know they were there or they would have. Sometimes it's like trying to find a needle in a haystack. When enough trees are infested with pests, they can be found through scouting and treated. But sometimes only one tree in more than an acre of trees has one of these post-harvest pests on it. No one notices they are in the tree until they are brought into the home.

Growers try to be good stewards of the land. Most growers strive to use pesticides only when they are needed to preserve tree quality and when they would effectively control the pest.

Recommendations for the use of chemicals are included in this publication as a convenience to the reader. The use of brand names and any mention of commercial products or services in this publication does not imply endorsement by the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service nor discrimination against similar products or services not mentioned. Individuals who use chemicals are responsible for ensuring that the intended use complies with current regulations and conforms to the product label. Be sure to obtain current information about usage and examine a current product label before applying any chemical. For assistance, contact an agent of the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service in your county.

Do's and Don'ts:

What to Do if You Have Post-Harvest Pests

Do: Shake your tree before setting it up in the home. Christmas trees can have anything from pollen to dust to leaves and dead needles. Shaking the tree will remove a lot of debris. Consider washing the tree with water from a garden hose and letting it dry before bringing your tree inside. In post-harvest pests are present, you'll see them falling out.

Don't: Mash *Cinara* aphids or other pests on carpets or furnishings. They will leave a purple or red stain. Stains may be removed by blotting it with dish detergent on a damp cloth.

Do: Vacuum pests up using an attachment without a beater bar.

Don't: Worry about the ornaments. The insects won't stay on them until next year.

Do: Treat with an insecticide if necessary. Consider using insecticidal soap to treat the tree for aphids which can be purchased from home improvement stores premixed. Spray aerosol home insecticides can also be used, but remember they are flammable. Set them off near the infected tree, but unplug the lights first.

Do: Remove the tree from your house if the infestation is getting out of hand.

Do: Return the tree for another one if treatments fail.

Don't: Give up on a real tree. The odds are against your ever having this problem again.