

What's Growing On?

BASTROP COUNTY MASTER GARDENER ASSOCIATION

March 2024

Genista Caterpillar

By Wizzie Brown

Spring seems to have arrived in Central Texas and my mountain laurels are putting on blooms. If you're like me and enjoy going in for a good sniff of those grape candy smelling flowers, while you're there take a look around for caterpillars that may be munching on foliage. Genista caterpillars can be quite common on mountain laurel but may also be found on crape myrtle and honeysuckle.



These caterpillars can grow up to one inch in length and are greenish yellow to orange in color with small black and white dots along their body. They have hairs that emerge along the body but are not densely covered. Genista caterpillars create webbing like that of webworms, but to a lesser degree. Larvae, or caterpillars, feed on leaves within webbing causing defoliation of the plant. Eggs are laid in overlapping clusters on the underside of leaves. Pupation occurs in a small, white silken cocoon that is attached to plants or structures. There are two

generations per year.

Normally genista caterpillars do not cause significant damage to trees, so no management is required. If you feel management is needed because of a large population, it can be rather simple. If plant size allows, caterpillars can be hand-picked and either smashed or dropped in a bucket of soapy water. Other options may include insecticidal soap, horticultural oils, botanicals, Spinosad, or *Bacillus thuringiensis* var. *kurstaki*, also known as Bt. *Bacillus thuringiensis* var. *kurstaki* specifically targets caterpillars but do not distinguish between “good” and “bad” caterpillars, so be careful where you apply and be aware of drift that may occur. When using Spinosad or Bt, good coverage of plant foliage is essential since the caterpillars need to consume a lethal dose. When using any pesticide product, be sure to read and follow all label instructions.

For more information or help with identification, contact Wizzie Brown, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service Program Specialist at ebrown@ag.tamu.edu.

This work is supported in part by the Crop Protection and Pest Management, Extension Implementation Program

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[award no. 2021- 70006-35347/project accession no. 1027036] from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) National Institute of Food and Agriculture.

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Lady Beetles Find a Home

By Howard Nemerov

I've written before on the benefits of growing Elbon Rye as a winter cover crop: how it helps build healthy soil and controls root-knot nematodes, among other qualities.¹

I've begun chopping Elbon Rye with my string trimmer to prepare beds for spring flowers. This went well in the back yard, but when I began chopping the side yard beds, I noticed *a lot* of Lady Beetle larvae and pupae. Puzzled, I searched each bed from end to end until I found aphid colonies, one of Lady Beetles' favorite food (right). Mystery solved.

The species below is called Seven-spotted Lady Beetle (*Coccinella septempunctata*) due to having seven spots on its elytra (shiny, hard wing covers).² The orange markings on their larvae are also a unique identifier (right).



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New Website Features

Check out our website, which features project slideshows, a new photo gallery section, and an events calendar to check out upcoming activities. Find news articles and our newsletters. Thanks to Dave Posh for keeping the info timely for us <https://txmg.org/bastropcounty/>

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This species is not native to the United States, but has been “repeatedly introduced to North America from Europe for the biological control of aphids.”³ Fortunately, I’ve found no reports that this species is invasive like Asian Lady Beetles, which are known to swarm indoors when weather cools.⁴ While both were introduced for their ability to consume large amounts of plant pests, Seven-spotted Lady Beetle is “friendlier”.

I also found native species *Hippodamia convergens* (Convergent Lady Beetle). It has up to 13 spots, though some adults may have “only a few.” They like to eat whiteflies as well as aphids,⁵ and have two diagonal white markings with a white fringe around the edge of their pronotum, the shiny, mostly-black, shield-like area just behind their head and before their wings.⁶ Compare this to the Seven-spotted Lady Beetle above, which has two white spots on the lateral edges of its pronotum (right).



I may need to wait another week or so until adults emerge before cutting down the rye.⁷ Add another benefit of Elbon Rye cover cropping: it attracts early season aphids which attract Lady Beetles, which are now ready to roll out the welcome mat for other insects arriving to prey on my garden. Work in balance with Nature, and get natural insect control as a result.

Endnotes

¹ Nemerov, Howard. “Many Benefits to Planting Cereal Rye as Cool-Season Cover Crop.” *What’s Growing On?* September 2023, pages 3–5. <https://txmg.org/bastropcounty/files/2023/09/09-Sep.pdf>

² Porter, Pat. “Lady Beetle.” Texas A&M Extension Entomology. Accessed March 20, 2024. <https://extensionentomology.tamu.edu/insects/lady-beetles/>

³ *Coccinella septempunctata.* Cornell University College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. Accessed March 20, 2024. <https://biocontrol.entomology.cornell.edu/predators/Coccinella.php>

⁴ Hurley, Janet. “Asian Lady Beetle Invasions.” Texas A&M Agrilife Extension, January 21, 2022. Accessed March 20, 2024. <https://citybugs.tamu.edu/2022/01/21/asian-lady-beetle-invasions/>

⁵ “*Hippodamia convergens* - Convergent Lady Beetle.” Bug Guide, Iowa State University. Accessed March 20, 2024. <https://bugguide.net/node/view/8374>

⁶ Porter, Pat. “Lady Beetle.” Texas A&M Extension Entomology. Accessed March 20, 2024. <https://extensionentomology.tamu.edu/insects/lady-beetles/>

⁷ “*Coccinella septempunctata.*” Cornell University College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.



Volunteering

Master Gardeners volunteer in the community to teach others about horticulture. We follow the research-based recommendations of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension. Members who complete 50 hours of volunteer service in the year after training earn the designation “Texas Master Gardener.” We use our title only when engaged in Texas A&M AgriLife Extension activities.