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Croton Scale Arrives in Lee County

by Jenny Evans, Native Plant Nursery Manager

There's a new kid in town, and he's not likely to be friendly. A scale insect, new to the United States as well as to science, has been documented on Sanibel. As of printing, the insect is being called croton scale; entomologists have not yet given a scientific name to the new pest. First discovered in Marathon, Florida on the ornamental plant croton in April of 2008, it has spread very quickly throughout south Florida, with verified reports from Lee, Collier, Palm Beach, Broward, Miami-Dade, and Monroe counties.

The croton scale (similar to all scale insects) feeds by sucking the fluids from the leaves and stems of



Sooty mold, seen here on myrsine, is often found on affected plants as an unsightly side effect.



Female croton scales, seen here on a firebush, are greenish-yellow with darker striations and larger in size than males.

plants. Small infestations will often result in discolored leaves or defoliation. In severe infestations, if enough of the leaves are damaged over a period of time, the plant may eventually die. More noticeable than direct damage from the scale insect is a side effect of the scale's presence. Sooty mold, a dense, black powder-like substance, grows on the scale's excrement, a sugary, sticky substance called honeydew. Often a scale infestation will be recognized only by an outbreak of sooty mold. While sooty mold itself will not kill a plant outright, it is often unsightly and messy in a landscape.

Recognizing the female croton scale is not particularly difficult. They are large and oval, approximately 1/8 to 1/4 inch long by 1/16 inch wide, yellowish-green with dark striations, and will be found covering the tips of stems. Males are significantly smaller, often found on the undersides of leaves, and are whitish in color.

Host plants for this insect are extremely wide ranging, including both native and non-native species. As of printing, over 50 plant species in over 25 different plant families have been verified as hosts. Anecdotally, our native gumbo limbo and strangler fig seem to be the most susceptible local species;

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however, firebush, paradise tree, marlberry, wild coffee, mastic, seagrape, and myrsine, among many others have made the notorious host list. Other plants are being added to the list on a weekly basis as they are verified.

As there is virtually no information on the biology and control of this species (since it is new to science), there really are not any good answers when it comes to preventing this insect. Biological and chemical controls are currently being explored for their effectiveness against the croton scale. With time, it is possible that this out-

break will be controlled by a natural predator; however, we will certainly be keeping tabs on its status as the year continues.

Feel free to stop by the nursery or give us a call if you have further questions about the croton scale.

Information provided by University of Florida IFAS Extension Service and Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Division of Plant Industry.

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