

Winter Moth Emerging as New Pest

A new leaf-eating insect pest, at least new to Rhode Island, is the Winter Moth (*Operophtera brumata*), a European insect introduced to Nova Scotia some years ago that has slowly spread south into New England.

It's called the Winter Moth because the adults emerge and fly about from November into January. Only the male moths fly, and they swarm around the crawling females, attracted by her pheromones, looking to procreate. The flying males are easily attracted to porch lights.

It's the larvae that hatch in the spring that are the problem, of course. They appear as early as March, with eggs hatching when temperatures average around 55F. These young larvae tunnel into buds, especially the flower buds of fruits, and feed inside them. Once the bud has been eaten the larvae will move to another bud to feed, and then older larvae will feed on foliage.

These are inch-worm style larvae, and grow to about 1 inch long at maturity. They will feed until mid-June when they migrate down to the soil to pupate.

The damages from the winter moth larvae include complete defoliation of host plants in areas with large infestations. They have had a serious impact on blueberry bushes, apple trees, and other fruit trees, where a lack of flowers leads to a fruitless season, even if the shrub or tree isn't defoliated. Other hosts include oaks and maples, as well as several other deciduous trees.

Although the winter moth is currently limited to coastal communities around Narragansett Bay, there is no reason to expect that they won't move further inland, according to Heather Faubert, an entomologist at URI that has been studying this insect. Heather and other New England scientists have been working to introduce a parasite of the larvae that they fully expect to control its spread and impact.

Identification of the Winter moth is difficult due to its identical appearance to the Bruce spanworm moth, a native species that does not cause major problems.

For more information on the Winter moth, go to www.umassgreeninfo.org, or contact Heather Faubert at (401)874-2967.