

Industrious Twig Chewers

By Susan Camp

Every spring, Jim and I rake up thousands of twigs that either have blown down during winter windstorms or just completed their life cycles. Years ago we noticed that the ends of some of the twigs on the ground looked as though they had been chewed, while other damaged twigs remained on the trees, each dangling by a shred of bark. We find most of the broken twigs on and around our linden trees.

In fact, broken, hanging twigs can be seen during any season. Close inspection of the twigs may reveal the characteristic chewing patterns of two common, native beetles, with the descriptive names twig girdler and twig pruner. With a little practice, you can learn to recognize the difference between the damage left by the two pests.

Twig girdlers and twig pruners are members of the family of long-horned beetles, of which there are 20,000 species. Most of the damage they cause becomes obvious in late summer or early fall when piles of $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inches twigs are noticed lying on the ground under the trees. Tree damage is primarily aesthetic, resulting in asymmetrical twig growth. Both twig girdlers and twig pruners produce frass, a fine, residue of chewed wood, resembling sawdust.

Twig girdlers (*Oncideres cingulata*) are commonly found on pecan and hickory trees, but will attack dogwood, persimmon, poplar, honey locust, linden, sweetgum, basswood, and some flowering fruit trees. The adult twig girdler is about $\frac{5}{8}$ -inch-long, brown with hairy, gray patches, and long antennae. The larvae, called roundheaded borers, are white with dark heads

Adult twig girdlers emerge in late summer to early fall. After mating, the female twig girdler neatly chews a V-shaped groove all the way around a small twig, leaving a core of undamaged wood. This is the point at which the twig breaks and either falls to the ground or is left hanging at an unsightly angle. The female gnaws a small hole and deposits each egg separately, up to 500 a season. The eggs soon hatch and the larvae overwinter in the chewed twigs. The larvae continue to develop in the spring, pupate, and the adults emerge during late summer to continue the cycle. The damage is mostly aesthetic, but, if infestation is heavy, pecan and hickory nut crops can be affected the next season.

Twig pruners (*Elaphidionoides villosus*) prefer oak twigs, but will infest hickory, maple, ash, linden, sweetgum, and persimmon, as well. The slender, brown adult twig pruners are about $\frac{3}{4}$ inch in length with long antenna. Larvae are similar in appearance to those of the twig girdler. Adults emerge in the spring, and females chew holes in tree bark near leaf buds at twig tips and deposit one egg in each hole. After hatching, larvae tunnel through twigs toward the tree trunk. In late summer, when the larvae are full-grown, they begin to chew outward from the center, leaving a thin strip of bark connecting the twig to the tree. The larvae will then pupate in the twigs, to emerge as adults the following spring.

Pesticides are of little use against these irksome critters. The best method of ridding your trees of girdlers and pruners is to gather the twigs whenever you notice them and burn them to destroy

the larvae or pupae. Prune any hanging twigs and dispose of them, too. If your tree ends up looking lopsided, you may have more pruning to do.

Excellent articles about these annoying pests include Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 2911-1423 “Twig Girdler/Twig Pruner”; NC State University/North Carolina Cooperative Extension publication “Twig Girdler”; University of Maryland Extension “Twig Girdlers and Twig Pruners—Trees”; and Clemson University Cooperative Extension HGIC 1216 “Twig Girdlers.” Many other state Cooperative Extensions offer articles on twigs girdlers and twig pruners. Several contain color photographs of the insects and the damage they cause.

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