



Bougainvillea Looper

Bougainvillea loopers, as the name suggests, feed primarily on bougainvillea, but they have also been reported to feed on other plants in the Nyctaginaceae family, such as the four-o'clock (*Mirabilis jalapa*). This looper has most often been observed feeding on the common purple bougainvillea, but it does not appear to have a preference for one bougainvillea variety over another—it likes them all.



Disclisiprocta stellata (Guenee)
Order Lepidoptera, family Geometridae

Description

The bougainvillea looper is a green or brown caterpillar about 1 inch long. It is also called “inchworm” or “measuring worm” because it moves in alternate contractions and expansions suggestive of measuring. The looper larva mimics stems and branches very well and feeds primarily at night, which is why you may see the damage but fail to find the culprit on the plant.

The adult is a moth, a very fast flyer with a wingspan of about 1 inch. The moth does not feed on the foliage. Like the larva, it also is active at night, when it is believed to lay its eggs on the underside of bougainvillea leaves.



Damage

The bougainvillea looper feeds from the edges of the leaves, which results in severe scalloping of the foliage. Attacks begin on the young, tender shoots and leaves before progressing down the stem. The loopers may move down the stems during the night and take shelter on the larger interior branches during the day. As the population multiplies, entire shrubs can be defoliated. To date, the bougainvillea looper has not generally been regarded as a serious pest. The insect will cause significant visual damage to bougainvillea, although this does not apparently result in the death of the plants.

Distribution

The bougainvillea looper is a very wide-ranging, migratory species from tropical America. It is a relatively new pest in Hawaii, first reported on Oahu in 1993, and since then has spread to Maui, the Big Island, Kauai, and probably Molokai. Although it could have been introduced to Hawaii with nursery stock, it is possible that it became established naturally through long-range dispersal, because the moths can travel great distances on air currents.

Control

Bacillus thuringiensis (BT, or Dipel®) and neem-based biological insecticide products should be effective on the loopers without harming other insects that may biologically control them, such as parasitic, mud, and paper wasps. Insecticidal oils and soaps will not control caterpillars such as the looper.

Most synthetic insecticides with labels permitting use against caterpillars on landscape ornamentals, such as carbaryl (Sevin®), will likely kill the bougainvillea looper, although these products are often destructive to beneficial insects as well.

Spraying insecticides late in the evening is recommended. This is when the bougainvillea looper caterpillars and adult moths are active, and also when the beneficial insects are not likely to be active.

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