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Protecting Against Tree Borers



Many species of trees have insect pests that are borers—insects that bore holes into the trunk, branches or twigs and feed on wood or inner bark. Most borer insects are specific to certain tree species or related groups of trees. In other words each tree has it's own type of borers and borers from one tree usually will not attack a different type of tree. Some trees have several species of borer insects that can infest them.

Borers usually cause damage inside the tree in their larval stage rather than as adults and so the damaging stage appears as a grub or caterpillar. The adults are usually beetles or moths but a few are sawflies (relatives of wasps). Many borers go straight through the bark and sapwood and into the center of the trunk or larger branches.

Timing is everything

These borers are particularly difficult to control because once they are inside the center of the branch virtually nothing can kill them.

Borers that go deeper into the wood must be controlled on the outside of the tree as adults before they breed or as they are laying eggs or before the young larva enter bark. Timing is everything with these borers because if the control measures are applied at the wrong time of year they will be of no use.

Systemic insecticides

A few types of borers remain in the sapwood or inner bark. These are the borers that can be killed with systemic insecticides. Systemic insecticides are taken into the tree, usually through roots, and then spread throughout the tree. But these systemic insecticides do not go into the wood of the tree, only into sapwood or inner bark. Bronze Birch Borer is one type of borer that remains in the inner bark and can be killed with systemic insecticides.

Something that one often reads in tree literature is that borers primarily attack stressed trees. While this is true in MANY cases it is not true in ALL cases. Some quite healthy and vigorous trees can be attacked by borers.

Trees with major borer problems in the Pocatello – Chubbuck area include:



Ash – Ash trees in Pocatello have had six different borer species identified in them, but the main pest is the Lilac and Ash Borer. This borer may attack perfectly healthy ash trees, especially young vigorous ash trees. Ash trees that have been topped are also often victim to borers that love the soft vigorous shoots that sprout from a topped ash tree.

Never top an ash tree unless you want to invite borers. The activity of the Lilac and Ash Borer adults peaks in June with some activity in July.

Treatment. Insecticides need to be applied to the trunk and branches of Ash trees during June and July to control this borer. Emerald Ash borer has made headlines in recent years because it infests and kills many different kinds of trees in the midwestern and eastern states. Emerald Ash borer has not been found yet in Idaho or anywhere in the West, so there is no need to try and control it here. Systemic insecticides labeled for Emerald Ash borer will not control any of the borers we get in our local ash trees as they are all deeper wood borers.



Quaking Aspen – Aspen trees in home yards are almost as well known for their borer problems as they are for their rustling leaves and yellow fall color. Although several borer species infest aspen trees, the Poplar Borer is the main pest. A very large borer, it makes large holes in the trunk often with piles of sawdust looking frass that it pushes out the holes. An aspen tree can survive many borer attacks and still continue to grow, but eventually the damage takes its toll.

Treatment. The poplar borer is a deep-wood borer, so systemic insecticides will do nothing to control it. Adults may be active from June into August so insecticides need to be on the trunk and effective for all three summer months.



Birch – The Bronze Birch Borer is one of the best-known tree insect pests in this area. It has ruined many beautiful weeping birch trees, which are the most susceptible birches. Birch trees that are under stress from heat give off a chemical that the Bronze Birch Borer can smell, and it signals to them that it is a tree under stress causing them to lay their eggs on those trees.

Treatment. This borer stays in the inner bark, so it can be killed with systemic insecticides poured onto the roots. Another solution is to plant white barked birch varieties that are borer resistant. There are several although they are not always available locally.



Spruce and Pines – Spruce are subject to a small bark borer called Ips beetles. They cause the tree to die from the top down. They are attracted to spruce trees that are under heat stress. A similar borer, the Pine Ips, can attack Austrian Pine and Ponderosa Pine.

Treatment. The normally recommended treatment is to spray insecticides on the trunk and branches several times during the growing season. There is conflicting evidence as to whether systemic insecticides work on Ips beetles or not. Some recent evidence indicates they may work.

Disclaimer—Each species of borer has control methods that work best for it. Try to avoid spraying or pouring pesticides unless you know which works and what time of year to apply it. Because of the nature of Tree Talk no specific recommendations for chemicals can be made in this article. Consult your county extension office or local certified arborist for control methods.