

Caterpillar pest earns name with way it hurts humans as well as plants

Kia'i Moku

By Joylynn Paman



Do you have a garden? Kids who like to run barefoot outside?

Ever

gather ti leaves for a table decoration or for cooking? Maui's latest invader may cramp your style thanks to the painful punch packed by the stinging nettle caterpillar (*Darna pallivitta*). This rather small insect, native to Asia, is only an inch long, but if your skin makes contact with its many rows of stinging, spiny hairs you might feel like you've been playing with fiberglass or run into a Portuguese man-of-war. The spines release an irritant that causes the skin to burn and itch, for up to three weeks. If spines get into the eyes or breathing become difficult, immediate medical attention is needed.

How did this pest get here? First discovered on the Big Island in 2001, the nettle caterpillar probably came in on plants from Taiwan. It then spread along the Big Island's eastern side and by last year was found in the Kona District and more recently in Kōhala. Reports of stinging incidents began increasing on the Big Island as more people came into contact with the caterpillars. Two years ago, the caterpillars were found by a nursery owner on Maui in a shipment of plants from the Big Island, which were immediately shipped back. A single caterpillar was detected and controlled in a cut flower arrangement in a

hotel display on Moloka'i. But in June of this year, the nettle caterpillar was found at a nursery on O'ahu and just a few weeks later, was discovered in lower Ha'ikū on Maui.

The voracious caterpillars can significantly damage a plant's leaves and reduce the aesthetic and economic value of ornamental and landscape plantings. The caterpillars feed on over 45 different species of plants, including fishtail palms, raphis palms, coconut, starfruit, ti, iris, most lilies, several varieties of grasses, and the endemic *mamaki*. Detecting the caterpillar is hard because it is so small. Adult moths are only 1/2 inch long.

The Hawai'i Department of Agriculture (HDOA) is now using pheromone traps to try and learn just how far this pest has spread in the Ha'ikū area. The hanging traps have a sticky board inside and use a pheromone or synthetic hormone to attract adult male moths. Traps have been placed in 33 one-mile grids to determine the extent of the infestation. The traps also help to control the adult moths, but the pheromone is not available commercially.

To help, you can learn how to identify the nettle caterpillar. Other caterpillars may have spines, but don't sting. For instance our beautiful native Kamehameha butterfly, the painted lady, red admiral and American lady all have caterpillars with spines. So be sure you have really found a nettle caterpillar before you go on the war path!



The stinging nettle caterpillar is only an inch long but its many rows of stinging, spiny hairs release an irritant that causes the skin to burn and itch. The caterpillar also can damage a plant's leaves significantly, and reduce the aesthetic and economic value of ornamental and landscaping plantings. (Photos by HDOA)

You can avoid transporting host plants around the island. If you find a nettle caterpillar or an adult moth outside the Ha'ikū area, call HDOA at 873-3555 or the PEST Hotline at 643-PEST. If your property becomes infested with the nettle caterpillar, plantings can be moved away from the home to reduce the risk of getting stung. You can use a bug zapper or spray host plants with a commercially available insecticide.

What does this mean for Maui? The current surveys will help establish what we're up against. We don't yet know whether the nettle caterpillar battle is winnable. What we do know is that a stronger statewide and inter-island quarantine system and better methods of early detection could

allow us to keep playing outside without worrying about the next invader that's lurking in the grass.

For more information about the stinging nettle caterpillar, check out the informative brochure from the University of Hawaii's College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources:

www.ctahr.hawaii.edu/oc/freepubs/pdf/IP-22.pdf

• "Kia'i Moku" (or "Guarding the Island") is prepared by the Maui Invasive Species Committee to provide information on protecting the island from invasive plants and animals that can threaten the island's environment, economy and quality of life. Joylynn Paman, is public relations and education specialist with the MISC.