

Do Marshmallows Grow on Trees?
Rick Abrahamson
SD Cooperative Extension Educator-Horticulture
For Week of June 6, 2011

I would like to share some information about a call I received the other day. A woman called with a question about her maple tree. She claimed that this tree had white fluffy things on the branches. She also indicated that these fluffy things had a black end to them. She even described them to resemble marshmallows. I asked her if they were somewhat sticky to the touch; she responded that she did not touch any. After which she commenced to go out and touch the “marshmallow” like things. She reported back that they were in fact sticky to the touch. I then knew what she was looking at.

She had given me a good description of a potential insect problem in the future. She had described the egg cases of the cottony maple scale or *Pulvinaria innumerabilis*. Immature females over winter under these hard shells and become active laying eggs during the spring. Egg sacs emerge out of the shell in June and hatch into crawlers in late June and early July. These crawlers move to the underside of leaves where they feed all summer long. In the fall they move to twigs before the leaves fall from the tree.

I remember a few summers ago when I thought it would be a good idea to leave a sample of these egg sacs on my desk to see when they hatch. One day I looked down and to my surprise my desk was crawling with crawlers. I did get some good photos and video of some of these critters due to my stupid idea.

Cottony maple scales typically do not damage the tree much as they feed. However, they do excrete honeydew (bug poop) which gets on our patio furniture and cars and develops a black sooty mold that is very difficult to clean off. If the population is sufficient they can damage the tree. Damage includes yellowing leaves, immature leaf drop, and even branch dieback. Maples, linden, and honey-locust can serve as host for these critters as can other hardwood species.

My recommendation to this lady and others since then is to watch for the crawlers and then spray the leaves with insecticidal soap or imidacloprid. Imidacloprid can be applied to the soil to get systemic protection through the entire year. If applied this way one could eliminate scouting for the crawlers. If there are only small amounts of egg sacs and the tree is small you should just eliminate them by hand. Also, you can prune out branches that have high numbers of egg sacs.

Source: IPM of Midwest Landscapes
<http://www.entomology.umn.edu/cues/Web/102CottonyMapleScale.pdf>

For questions and comments about organic production in the home garden feel free to call me at 605-394-2188 or email me at ricky.abrahamson@sdstate.edu.