

Gilmer resident on a mission to save the hemlocks

By Becky Antworth

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An unwanted pest has taken up residence in North Georgia. Though barely visible to the naked eye, the hemlock woolly adelgid threatens to change the landscape as we know it.

The hemlock woolly adelgid, *Adelgid tsugae*, is a tiny insect that feeds on the fluids of hemlock trees. The adelgid was introduced to the U. S. from Asia in the 1920s and has been spreading steadily throughout the country since. Today, trees all over North Georgia are being attacked and killed. According to the U. S. Forest Service, if the infestation is not controlled, 90 percent of native hemlocks in North Georgia could be decimated in the next 5 to 10 years.

An adelgid attack typically starts on the bottom branches and moves

upward. Once an insect finds the base of a hemlock, it will settle in, feed, and lay 100 to 300 eggs. Eggs will later hatch, and the bugs will search out their own suitable feeding sites further up the tree.

In addition to sucking vital fluids, the adelgid may also inject toxins into the tree, accelerating needle drop and branch death. Infested hemlocks typically die within four years of first infestation.

Hemlocks suffering from an adelgid infestation often have a grayish-green appearance. The little white clumps that can be seen clinging to the underside of the branches are the egg sacs holding the next generation's attackers.

Ron Tishaw has several infested trees at his house in Ellijay.

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Photo by Becky Antworth

Ellijay resident Ron Tishaw holds a branch from one of his Hemlock trees that's been infested by the hemlock woolly adelgid, an invasive insect that has now spread throughout North Georgia.

Hemlocks from 1B

"Hemlocks are the most beautiful, natural resource we have," said Tishaw, holding an infested branch from one of his dying trees. He's been trying to treat them himself, but "I want DNR to do something," he said. "This is ridiculous."

Others aren't waiting for the Department of Natural Resources. Mark and Donna Shearer started the nonprofit organization Save Georgia's Hemlocks to help North

Georgia homeowners save their trees from infection.

The group holds free Hemlock Clinics for the public to educate about the growing threat and teach residents the latest techniques to keep the pests under control.

Other local naturalists are also joining in the battle of the bug. The Benton MacKaye Trail Association recently hosted a Hemlock Clinic. About 60 concerned citizens turned out for the event,

said BMTA president Ralph Heller.

Heller and the BMTA also aim to treat all the infested Hemlocks along the Benton MacKaye Trail. The preferred method is to inject a nicotine-based chemical into the soil at the base of an infested tree. Treatment has been effective at ridding the trees of adelgids and protects them from further infection for four to five years. The chemical is commercially available and relatively inexpensive, making it a good option for homeowners.

But over a large area chemical injection is labor-intensive and time-consuming and may not be a viable long-term solution. To that end, one idea in the works is to release a species of predatory beetle that likes to dine on the adelgids. Some study labs in Georgia are currently trying to raise the sesame-seed sized beetles for release in the wild.

For now, though, homeowners looking to do-it-themselves to help their hemlocks are advised to use chemical treatments injected into the soil or sprayed on

ed into the soil or sprayed on the branches.

"You can save your trees if you're proactive," said Heller.

For more information on how to treat your hemlock trees, or to attend a Hemlock Clinic, visit Save Georgia's Hemlocks at www.savegeorgiashemlocks.org, or call their Hemlock Help Line at 706-429-8010. The next clinic is scheduled for Thursday, October 15 at 7 p.m. at the Towns County Courthouse, 48 River Street, Hiawassee.

To volunteer to treat Hemlocks along the Benton MacKaye Trail, visit www.bmta.org.



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At a recent Hemlock Clinic, Mark Shearer of Save Georgia's Hemlocks demonstrated how to use a soil injector and chemical solution to treat infested hemlocks, one of the currently recommended options for homeowners. The next Hemlock Clinic will be October 17 in Towns County.