

Hemlock trees dying at fast rate

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Many hemlock trees are dead and dying in the northeast counties of Georgia, and the infestations of the hemlock woolly adelgid that are killing the trees are getting worse in north central Georgia, Donna Shearer of Save Georgia's Hemlocks said.

"In Fannin County, the infestation is light to moderate in most places, but the eastern to southern parts of the county, from Blairsville to Blue Ridge, are showing the most evidence of the woolly adelgid," she said.

This spring will be a critical time in which the infestation will become more evident in the areas of the county already infested, and it is expected to spread to areas where the pest has not yet been seen. "So vigilance will be key during the spring, and early treatment of infested trees will make a huge difference in being able to save them," Shearer said.

The hemlock woolly adelgid, an invasive insect from Asia with no local natural predator, "is wreaking havoc across Georgia, and we've now received reports that the species has now moved into some northwest counties," Shearer said.

Because the pace at which the invasive insect is spreading is so rapid, and the damage they are causing is so extensive, it is crucial for people with hemlock trees on their property to take immediate action if the trees are to be saved, she said.

Hemlocks can be treated in this climate year-round, unless the ground is frozen or water-logged. "This is a good time to treat the trees. Don't wait until spring after the voracious insects have fed on them all winter," Shearer said.

Treating hemlocks is easy, safe and inexpensive compared to the cost of taking

down large, dead trees and the potential loss of property value, she said.

Mild to moderately infested hemlocks can be treated with a product that contains 75 percent Imidacloprid, the same ingredient that is in flea collars. "If you treat your own trees and buy the generic version of the product, the cost is between 17 and 52 cents per inch of trunk diameter," Shearer said. To have the treatment done professionally, the cost averages \$1 to \$2 per trunk diameter inch, she said.

Very large or heavily infested hemlocks can be treated with a product sold as Safari. This product costs more — 77 cents to \$3.07 per trunk diameter inch, if one does it oneself — but it's very

effective and fast, usually controlling an infestation in three to eight weeks, Shearer said.

For those treating hemlocks themselves, soil injectors can be borrowed from Don Gibbs at the Georgia Forestry Commission, located at 10990 Morganton Hwy. Gibbs can be reached at 706-374-6232.

Imidacloprid and Safari are available locally, she said.

Shearer urged all those with hemlocks on their property to treat and try to save them, and for those who don't have hemlocks, to volunteer with or donate to Save the Hemlocks. The organization is a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) organization made up solely of volunteers dedi-

cated to preserving and restoring endangered hemlocks.

Beyond the loss of the trees' beauty, losing the hemlocks would have dire consequences for both the economic and environmental health of north Georgia, she said.

"Hemlocks cool the temperatures of the trout streams, play a key role in providing food and habitat for about 120 species of vertebrates and over 90 species of birds, and protect watersheds and water quality," Shearer said.

Hemlock trees can add as much as 7 to 10 percent to homeowners' property values, provide the net cooling effect of 10 room-sized air conditioners running 20 hours a day, and perform millions of dollars worth of water purification along our waterways, she said.

For more information, call the Hemlock Help Line at 706-429-8010 or visit www.savegeorgiashemlocks.org.



The white, woolly egg sacs of the hemlock woolly adelgid that appear on the underside of hemlock branches, just where the needles attach to the branch, are shown here. That is usually the first sign of hemlock woolly adelgid infestation that people can see, and it's most visible in the spring, Donna Shearer of Save Georgia's Hemlocks said.