e-GRO Alert

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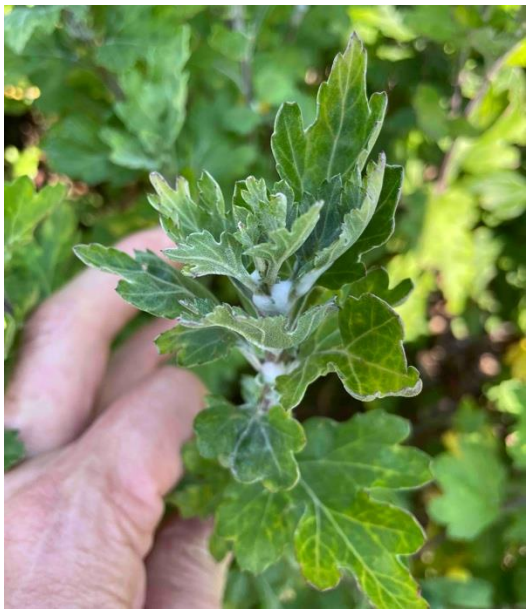
Something Wicked This Way Comes

There's a new pest in the neighborhood...

Uninvited visitors who come to stay and make pests of themselves are nothing new apparently. Each year a new pest or three turns up in our eastern Long Island, NY Insect Diagnostic Lab. Some of these are new to the US or just to the region. Fairly recent examples include crapemyrtle bark scale on crapemyrtle, 'European hornbeam leafhopper' on European hornbeam, chilli thrips on hydrangea (unlike chilli thrips in the southeastern US ours isn't interested in roses and foliage plants), hellebore aphid on hellebore, and an aphid on Kwanzan cherry that causes leaf galling similar to cherry leaf curl disease.



Sunflower spittlebug masses on chrysanthumum stems. The nymphs produce and live in the foam which protects against desiccation and natural enemies.

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Of those just new to the region, some appear to be simply expanding their range northwards from the south finding Long Island's moderate coastal environment in their comfort zone where they can regularly overwinter. Sunflower spittlebug (*Clastoptera xanthocephala*) is one example that first appeared in 2022 on chrysanthemums though may have been overlooked much earlier on other hosts. As the name suggests, the nymphs produce small foamy masses, long ago quaintly termed 'cuckoo spittle,' on stems where they feed. Meadow spittlebug, a common related insect in the area, is a crop pest occasionally on ornamentals and often on strawberries producing similar offending masses in spring that are gone by summer. So seeing these masses on plants after mid-summer (and complaints from growers) suggested something new going on worth closer examination. I kept some of the infested mums in the lab to rear out adults and were able to identify the culprit. This past year we also maintained a small number of nymphs on lavender that were again identified as sunflower spittlebug when adults emerged. A kind of 'froghopper, the adults are about 1/8" long and range in color

from shiny black to dark tan. I have sometimes found them together with the nymphs that create the foam shelters. We don't have much information on their biology but like the related meadow spittlebug they may be overwintering as eggs inserted into stems.

Nearly 125 years ago Otto Heidemann, US National Museum Hemipterist and noted engraver to USDA (his talented wife created remarkably accurate insect sculptures for teaching) reported finding sunflower spittlebug in Washington, DC in August on chrysanthemum and 'in very great numbers' on common ragweed (2). A small handful of references have remarked on this insect since, including one (2) noting the adults biting the arm of a collector in 1928 - an experience I've not had yet. A map from iNaturalist.org (3) has reports of this insect mostly over the last few years from around the Southeast US. Although the insect has been known from the mid-Atlantic region for over a century, despite the host range including some common ornamentals it is interesting that only now it is becoming a pest. Besides chrysanthemum, objectionably high numbers have been also seen in the area on goldenrod and lavender in nurseries. I've also noted high populations on the weed mugwort and (so far) low levels on sunflowers grown for cut flowers. It's reported to be fond of plants in the daisy (Asteraceae) family, though as noted we've confirmed it in lavender (mint family, Labiatae) as well. Fortunately, I have yet to see any stunting, distortion, dieback or other physical damage sometimes associated with the presence of spittlebugs. Several insecticides work well to control spittlebugs or reduce populations though relatively few products are actually labeled. A jet of water may be sufficient to clean up plants or flowers headed for sale.

References

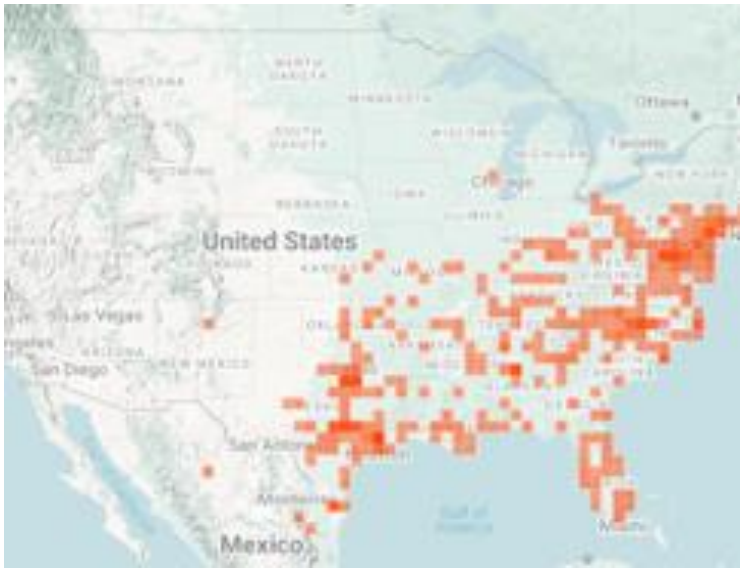
1. Doering, K. 1931. Some biological notes on the Cercopidae north of Mexico (Homoptera). J. Kansas Entomol. Soc 6(2): 51
2. Heidemann, O. 1901. Remarks on the spittle insect *Clastoptera xanthocephala* Germ. Proc. Ent. Soc. Washington 4(4): 399-401.
3. INaturalist.org. Distribution map of *Clastoptera xanthocepha*. Accessed 3/9/2025.

Sunflower spittlebug residue on sunflower

Mating pair of sunflower spittlebugs

Sunflower spittlebug masses on lavender

Sunflower spittlebug masses on goldenrod in late summer



iNaturalist (3) reports of sunflower spittlebug in the US. There are also reports from Hawaii (not shown)

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