



Sawfly Pests in the Landscape

By Pamm Cooper, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Sawflies are members of the insect order, Hymenoptera, that includes ants, wasps, and bees. Sawfly adults are wasp-like and have a saw-like tube which is used to incise holes in plant tissue for depositing eggs. Unfortunately for gardeners, sawflies often lay large numbers of eggs on a single plant, and the caterpillar-like larvae can devour large amounts of plant material in short order. Sawflies are usually plant specific, so pine sawflies may have many pines as a host plant, birch sawflies are on many birch species and rose sawflies will attack many kinds of roses, but they will find other plants suitable for food. Be vigilant and try to detect them as soon as possible. If you have hibiscus, pines, birch or roses, sawflies can be chronic problems if not controlled.

In mid-spring the rose slug sawfly becomes active and attacks many kinds of roses in the landscape including the Knock- Out™ varieties. The larvae chew the leaves only on the under sides when they first hatch, so the top of leaves look normal. Later on, feeding damage from the larger instars create small holes in the middle of leaves. Leaves may then only have veins left as insects reach the final instars. Check underneath the leaves for larvae and crush them if found or sprayed directly with insecticidal soap. Sawfly larvae can often be knocked off by tapping branches. Next year, look at the leaf undersides periodically to detect larvae as soon as possible.



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Hibiscus sawfly larvae are green, have dark heads, and they begin feeding on the undersides of hibiscus leaves in mid to late July. Later damage appears as holes larvae become larger. To catch infestations quickly, check the undersides of leaves as soon as small holes are noticed. They can consume most of the leaf except the veins, and the damage may be confused with that of scarab beetles. Manage these pests by handpicking larvae, crushing them, or removing leaves that have many of them. Cocoons are found on the base of the plants and can be removed and disposed of. Insecticidal soaps are effective means of control also when used as a direct spray, or products containing the active ingredient Spinosad, can be sprayed both on the insects and on the foliage where it will be devoured as the larvae feed, but it is toxic to bees until it dries on foliage.

There are two species of sawfly that are serious pests of pines in New England: the redheaded pine sawfly and the European pine sawfly. The European pine sawfly commonly attacks *Mugo* pines in the landscape, but will also feed on Japanese, Scotch, and other pines. Usually, pine sawflies are found on young trees that are between 1 to 14 feet tall. Needle damage first appears as browning of the needles and gradually the branches will become stripped of needles. This is because the larvae feed together in large groups. If all the needles have been consumed from one tree, the sawflies will move to another nearby pine. Best control is when larvae are small to keep damage minimal.



Pine sawfly larvae and devastation to a Mugo pine.

Birch and dogwoods are also attacked by sawfly species. Birch can be damaged in spring and again in summer by different species. Dogwood sawflies are active late in the summer. Damage from these sawflies is sometimes confused with that of caterpillars and people use *Bt var* Kurstaki thinking that it is a safe control option that will not harm any other insects, which is true. But it controls only caterpillars, not sawfly larvae. Sawfly larvae may be hand-picked or knocked off small trees and put in a pail of soapy water. Ohio State has a good fact sheet on dogwood sawflies: <https://bygl.osu.edu/node/1354>

Sawfly adults are hard to spot sometimes as they appear to be wasps hanging about the garden. But recognize the life cycles of the sawflies that are pests in your gardens or landscapes, the time of year they become active and then check for larvae before you see severe damage. The smaller you find them, the easier it is to get rid of them. Since some insecticides that control sawflies can harm bees and other non-target insects; it may be better to try and knock larvae off plants or crush them, if possible. Never spray flowers, just foliage or the insects directly.

For questions on identifying and controlling sawflies or on any home or garden topic, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education Center, toll-free in CT, at (877) 486-6271, visit us at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or call your local Cooperative Extension Center.