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Potential Losses Due to the Pink Hibiscus Mealybugs

The pink hibiscus mealybugs (PHMs) are a pest of many plants in the tropical and subtropical regions of the world. This scale was first discovered in Florida in 2002 and now has been recently discovered in Nueces County, Texas. They commonly attack such plants as hibiscus, croton, allamanda, bougainvillea, lantana and oleander. However PHMs are pests of more than 300 plant species, so they have the potential to become a serious pest of ornamental and agricultural crops.

Adult and nymph PHMs look very similar to other mealybug species. However, the PHMs have a red or pink body, one or two pairs of lateral wax filaments on the posterior end and two "buttons" of wax on the abdomen. Female adults have no wings and are covered with wax, but the males have wings and two long waxy tails. The males will not be found as commonly as the females.

After mating, females will lay egg masses containing 300-600 eggs that are bright pink to red in color. The newly hatched crawlers are also pink in color. The crawlers resemble adults but they are smaller in size. These crawlers will begin to feed, especially on tender new growth. They usually disperse to neighboring plants by walking from plant to plant, hitching a ride on animal or plant material or are carried by the wind.

Feeding causes new leaves to curl and young stems to become thick instead of elongating. As the PHM feeds, a toxin is released that causes the damage in the plant. The other mealybugs found in Texas will not cause this type of damage. PHM also secrete honeydew, so black sooty mold can develop on leaves. If populations become large, then plant death can occur.

For control, prune infested plants or plant branches and double bag it before disposing. Also ant control may be necessary since they may guard the PHMs in return for their honeydew. These ants will prevent wasps from attacking the PHMs. Contact insecticides are not suggested, since the chemicals may not contact the PHMs due to the wax filaments. If sprays must be used, insecticidal soaps and horticultural oils are suggested to provide some control while not killing so many natural enemies. Systemic insecticides may provide some control but the eggs and young crawlers usually escape chemical exposure. The best method for control relies on long term management using biological control.

One bright spot is that the USDA has identified some predators and parasitoids that are effective at reducing populations of PHMs. Where parasitic wasps have been released, the PHM populations are reduced to low numbers. If you suspect PHM

infestation, your regional Texas Department of Agriculture should be contacted. A good digital picture may be enough for identification. If PHMs are in your area, then the Texas Department of Agriculture will work to release beneficial insects in the infested areas.

For more information about pink hibiscus mealybugs can be found at: http://www.mrec.ifas.ufl.edu/lso/pinkmealybug.htm. This website is maintained by the University of Florida and contains current information on host plants and control options.

Various stages in the life cycle of the pink hibiscus mealybug, *Maconellicoccus hirsutus* (Green). Photo by Dale Meyerdirk, National Biological Control Institute.