

Spotted Lanternfly May Be Getting Closer

By Susan Camp

The planned topic for this week's "Gardening Corner" was supposed to cover how to prevent pesky rabbits from eating everything in the garden, but this morning I read an article from the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS) that the dreaded spotted lanternfly has been found in Lynchburg and Richmond. Richmond! Yikes! That's getting too close to home, and is a reason for Middle Peninsula residents to be concerned.

The spotted lanternfly (*Lycorma delicatula*) is a native of China, where its primary host is the tree-of-heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*). In Virginia, tree-of-heaven is a nuisance tree that grows along roadsides, forest edges, and on any disturbed land. It seeds prolifically and grows rapidly, regenerating from stumps and root sprouts, which makes it difficult to destroy by cutting alone. Herbicides are usually necessary to kill this invasive tree, which, in addition to unrestrained growth, contains allelopathic chemicals that are toxic to other trees.

If the spotted lanternfly fed solely on *Ailanthus*, the unwelcome tree might be a positive addition to the insect arsenal, but unfortunately, the planthopping pest also feeds on valuable stone fruit crops, grapes, hops, and numerous hardwood species, including maples and nut trees like walnut and almond.

Spotted lanternfly was first discovered in eastern Pennsylvania in 2014. From there, it spread to Delaware and New York. In January 2018, the insect was discovered in the city of Winchester in Frederick County in the northwest corner of Virginia. That region of the Commonwealth is home to many apple orchards and other fruit crops, as well as numerous wineries and logging operations. Large stands of *Ailanthus* also are found in Frederick County.

In 2019, Virginia established a quarantine to restrict accidental movement of spotted lanternfly to other localities, both instate and out of state. The insect has since spread throughout counties in the Shenandoah Valley and into the Piedmont, and the quarantine was repealed on March 27, 2025.

The female spotted lanternfly lays brownish-gray egg masses on smooth-barked trees or shrubs in September. The egg masses overwinter until early May, when the eggs hatch into 3/8-inch long, white-spotted black nymphs. The black and white coloration remains for the first three instars, or stages of development, changing to red patches with white spots in the fourth instar in late July. The 1-inch-long adult spotted lanternfly has a yellow abdomen, banded in black and a black head and legs. The forewings are light grayish-brown with black spots and a network of interwoven black lines. The bright red hind wings are punctuated with black spots. Wingtips are separated from the red areas by broad white stripes and marked with black blocks. At rest the adult lanternfly resembles a moth, and holds its wings in a "tented" position over its body.

The trunks of trees infested with adult spotted lanternflies develop dark wounds that weep tree sap and attract other insects, especially wasps. In addition to feeding on the trees, lanternflies excrete a sticky substance called honeydew, which drips down the trunk and onto the ground below. Sooty mold often forms on the honeydew, causing scorched-appearing patches. Adults and nymphs are most often seen climbing on tree trunks at dusk.

Most of us who live on the Middle Peninsula have never seen a spotted lanternfly, and we would like to keep it that way. If you think that you have found a spotted lanternfly, at any stage of development from egg mass to adult, attempt to capture it in a sealed container or plastic bag or snap a photo and take the picture or specimen to your Extension Office.

Find articles on the VCE website, including Publications ENTO -265NP (ENTO-291NP) “Pest Alert: Spotted Lanternfly (*Lycorma delicatula*)”; ENTO-180NP (ENTO-264NP) “Spotted Lanternfly”; ENTO-268NP (ENTO-321NP) “Spotted Lanternfly Life Cycle in Virginia”; ENTO-322NP “Residential Control for Spotted Lanternfly (SLF) in Virginia”; and the article “Spotted Lanternfly in Virginia.” For information about tree-of-heaven, see VCE Publication 420-322 “Invasive Exotic Plant Species: *Ailanthus* (*Ailanthus altissima*)”.