

Look, Don't Touch Fuzzy Caterpillars

By Susan Camp

Every gardener knows that gardening isn't just about picking pretty flowers and harvesting plump, juicy vegetables. Sometimes, bad things happen in the garden, awful things that hurt and make you want to cry.

Several weeks ago, fellow Master Gardener Ann Gentry posted a photo on Facebook of an evil-looking critter called a saddleback caterpillar. Ann was working in her mother-in-law's garden when she felt a terrible, burning pain that she described as feeling "like a thousand pieces of fiberglass electrified up and down my wrist." Ann's arm turned a blotchy red and remained swollen for about an hour. Ice helped to decrease the pain and swelling. Fortunately, Ann's husband, Steve, snapped a photo of the offending beast. It is a good idea to take a picture of an insect or animal if you are bitten or stung in case you need to seek medical help.

Armed with the photo, Ann turned to the internet for information on the saddleback and how to decrease the pain from its sting. The saddleback caterpillar is the larva of a slug moth, (*Acharia stimulea*), a nondescript, dark-brown moth with grayish markings. Slug caterpillars, so called because they glide along branches at a snail's pace, rather than walking like most caterpillars, cause little damage to trees and garden plants. The saddleback feeds on oak, apple, cherry and maple trees, corn and bean plants, and flowering ornamentals. Saddlebacks are native to the eastern United States, from Massachusetts to Florida and west to Texas, Kansas, and Indiana.

The distinctive appearance of the saddleback serves as a warning to stay away. The larva is brown on both ends, with a bright green "saddle blanket" trimmed in white, centered with a brown "saddle." Two sets of spiny horns adorn each end of the saddleback with rows of bristly hairs along each side.

The saddleback is considered medically significant because of the presence of urticating, or irritating, hollow spines that contain venom sacs. Simply brushing against a saddleback will cause the spines to embed and break off in the skin, resulting in localized, intense, burning pain. Spines can be propelled through the air, stick to clothing, or adhere to surfaces. The affected area swells and turns red, often for several hours. Sometimes blisters erupt. Systemic symptoms can include migraine headaches, asthma, gastrointestinal distress, and anaphylactic shock.

Immediate treatment involves washing with soap and water to remove some surface venom. Adhesive tape applied to the affected area and pulled away quickly will remove spines, but fresh tape must be used for each area to avoid reintroducing the spines. Application of ice relieves pain and burning.

Several sources state that antihistamines might not relieve symptoms, but steroidal creams are helpful. Anyone who has had an allergic reaction to bee or wasp stings should seek medical attention.

Wear long sleeves and gloves, especially in late summer and fall months when saddlebacks are feeding. Repellents containing DEET are ineffective for saddlebacks.

Since saddlebacks cause little damage to foliage, there rarely is a reason to employ a chemical pesticide. For a large infestation, *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) has proven successful. Contact a Gloucester Master Gardener at the Extension Office (804) 693-2602 on Thursdays from 2 p.m. to 3 p.m. or on Tuesdays at the Gloucester Main Library from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. for information on pesticide use.

The saddleback is one of six species of stinging caterpillar in Virginia. Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication ENTO-75NP "Stinging Caterpillars: Slug Caterpillars and Flannel Moths" contains detailed information and color photos of several varieties. The University of Kentucky Extension ENTFACT-003 entry "Stinging Caterpillars" and the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) "Featured Creatures" publication "Saddleback Caterpillars" offer further helpful information.

Ann was fortunate that her pain decreased after only an hour. The saddleback caterpillar is one garden critter we wish would find a new home.

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