

# Pests on Cut Christmas Trees



Christmas trees in North Carolina are grown in a near-natural setting. Most tree patches are adjacent to woods. Native broad leaf plants and grasses serve as ground covers around trees. There is an abundance of wildlife and insect life -- some of which make their homes in Christmas trees.

## ***Do's and Don'ts: What to Do if You Have Post-Harvest Pests***

**Do:** Shake your tree before setting it up in the home.

**Do:** Vacuum pests up using an attachment without a beater bar.

**Do:** Remove the tree from your house.

**Do:** Return the tree for another one. Shaking the tree before it's placed in the home should determine if there are any other pests on them.

**Don't:** Mash *Cinara* aphids or other pests on carpets or furnishings. They will leave a purple or red stain.

**Don't:** Fumigate your house or use a household insecticide. They aren't needed.

**Don't:** Worry about the ornaments. The insects won't stay on them.

**Don't:** Give up on a real tree. The odds are against your ever having this problem again.

## ***Unwanted Hitchhikers***

Unfortunately, your real Christmas tree may have an unwanted hitchhiker. There are several kinds of insects that spend the winter in conifers such as Fraser fir. When you bring the tree into your home, the insects behave as though spring has come and become active again. Like ants at a picnic, they are an unwanted nuisance. In many ways, these hitchhikers are a symptom of a fresh tree recently harvested.

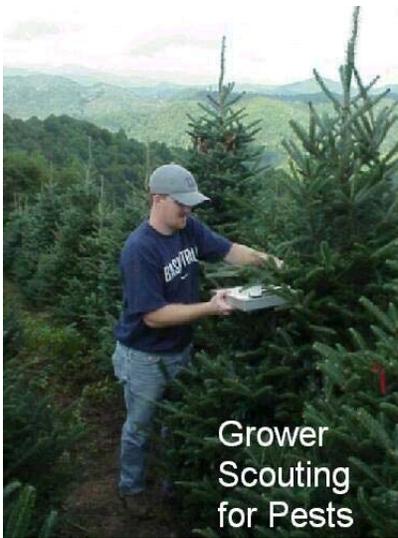
## ***Rarely Occur***

Please remember these pests are rare. Perhaps one tree in 100,000 has any one of these pests on it. Chances are you can get a real tree every year for the rest of your life and never be troubled with them again.

## ***A Worse Problem in Warm Falls***

These insects are active in late fall when there are unseasonably warm temperatures. Therefore we experience worse problems in years with a warm, dry fall such as 2001 and 2004.

## ***Not the Grower's Fault***



Should the growers have treated for these pests? Unfortunately, they didn't even know they were there. It's a little like trying to find a needle in a haystack. Sometimes only one tree in several acres of trees has one of these post-harvest pests on it. Although Christmas trees are regularly scouted for pests that damage the tree, these post-harvest pests are rarely observed in the field. No one knows they are in the tree until it is brought into the home.

Growers try to be good stewards of the land and water. Most growers strive to use pesticides only when they are absolutely needed to preserve tree quality and when they would effectively control the pest. Pesticides are generally ineffective against these dormant post-harvest pests. It would not be worth treating all harvested trees

for the handful that have pest problems.

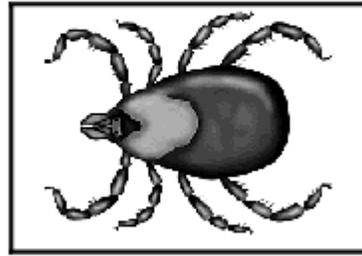
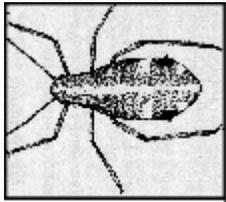
## ***The Post Harvest Rogues***

Few insect and mite pests on Christmas trees create problems in the home. Only three rogues make the list of unwanted wintertime bugs: the *Cinara* aphid, the spruce spider mite, and occasionally, the praying mantis.



***Cinara aphids*** are large brown or almost black aphids. They are common enough on Virginia and white pines to warrant treatment but are rare on fir trees. *Cinara* aphids and their eggs are often hidden down inside the lower branches of Christmas trees where they are hard to find.

Many people have mistaken *Cinara* aphids for ticks. Even pesticide applicators have done so in the past. But it's simple to tell them apart. Ticks have never been found on Christmas trees in North Carolina at any time of year.



### ***Cinara* Aphids**

- Aphids have 6 legs. They are true insects.
- Aphids don't bite.
- Aphids feed on plants. *Cinara* aphids won't feed on your house plants.
- Aphids do not carry diseases.
- Aphids may be present as eggs or adult forms.

### **Ticks**

- Adult ticks have 8 legs. They are a member of the spider family.
- Ticks feed on mammals.
- Ticks may carry diseases to people or pets.
- Ticks have not been found on Christmas trees.



***Spruce spider mites*** appear as tiny red and brown dots when shaken out of Christmas trees. Spider mite feeding on the farm discolors the foliage of the tree and can lead to premature needle drop. In the home, spider mites can create small red stains on carpets, ornaments, or furnishings. Spider mites only feed on the tree and quickly die once the tree is removed.



***Praying mantises*** are a well-known insect predator. Their egg cases are sometimes found in Fraser fir Christmas trees. Females lay between 200-400 eggs in the fall in a frothy liquid which hardens, sticking to the branch. Once warmed in the home, the eggs can hatch and the tiny mantis can disperse. Again, these insects do not bite or carry disease. If the egg case can be located,

remove it from the tree and put it outside. Small mantises that have escaped can be vacuumed up or caught and released outside.

### ***Questions?***

If you have a pest problem on your cut Christmas tree and it seems to be different from the rogues described here, contact your retailer. They will work with their supplier and with the Cooperative Extension Service to identify the pest and make a recommendation.