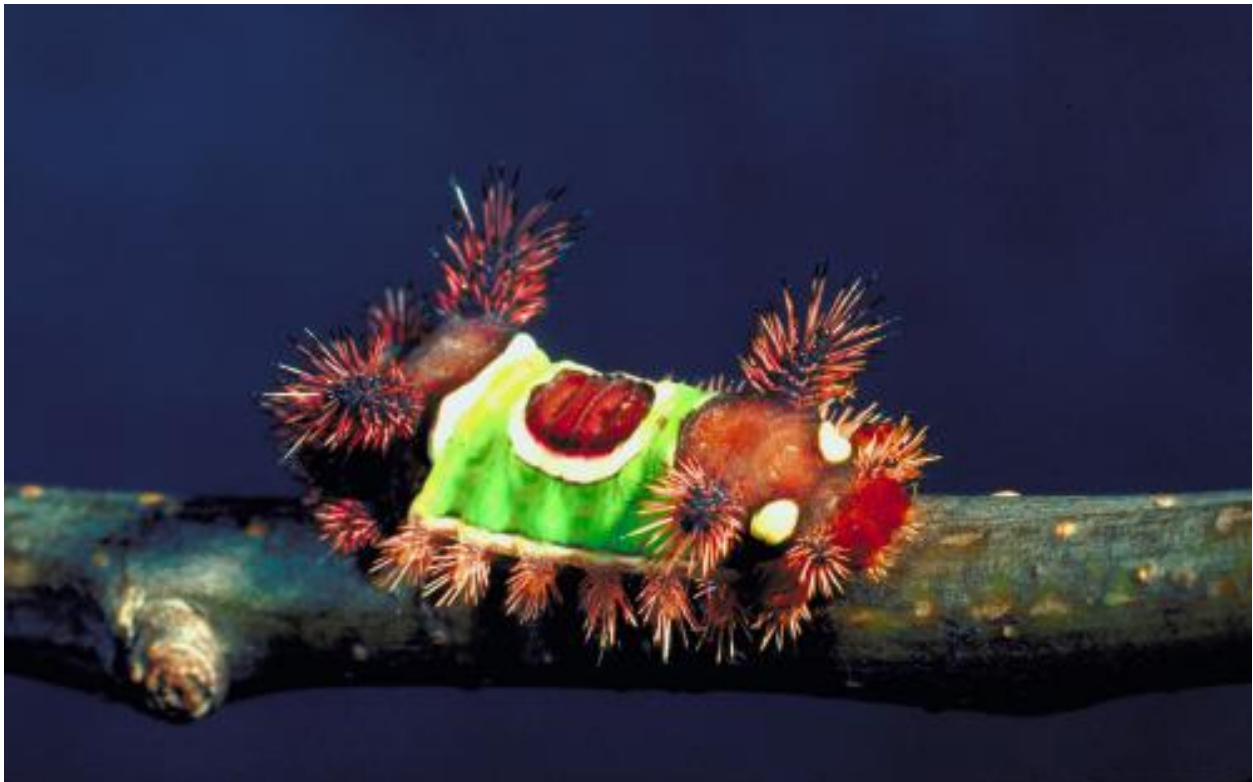


Musings from the Extension Office
Stafford Cooperative Extension Office
September 17, 2019

Insect Alert

Recently, while mowing my lawn, I felt a sharp sting on the side of my leg which lasted several hours. Looking down, I saw an insect I recognized immediately. It is a saddleback caterpillar and it is the larvae of the slug moth (*Acharia stimulea*).



The saddleback caterpillar has a distinctive color pattern, dark brown on the front and end sections with a bright green "saddle blanket" outlined in white and topped by a brown "saddle" in the middle. It also sports four venomous protruding spikes or horns. The insect is native to the eastern United States and may feed on

a wide array of host plant species, including beans, iris, sunflowers, blueberries, sweet corn, and grapevines.

The insect is not a significant horticultural pest, but the potent venom can cause a severe medical reaction in some people. The horns embed deeply into the skin and break off. In addition to the intense burning sensation that can last for hours, some people may experience migraines, gastrointestinal problems, or even which lasted for several hours shock. Should contact occur, remove the spines right away as the longer the spines are embedded in tissue, the more venom is released. While ice packs and over-the-counter-medications may help with the pain, victims with more severe reactions should seek medical attention promptly.

Plant Identification

Recently, a specimen was brought in to the office for identification. It was found in a local garden. The first time I saw it was when I was taking a plant identification at GCC and the class was taking a walk along the river. It covered large areas along the walking trail and I was informed it was Japanese stiltgrass (*Microstegium vimineum*).



Joe Boggs, OSU Extension©



Japanese stiltgrass is an invasive grass that threatens native plants and natural habitats in the eastern United States. Native to Japan, China, central Asia and India. *M. vimineum* was originally documented in Tennessee in 1919 and is believed to have been accidentally introduced to the United States through its use as a packing material.

Stiltgrass thrives in moderate-to-densely shaded areas subject to regular soil disturbances, such as flooding, mowing, tilling, and high foot traffic. Stiltgrass is commonly found along roadways and ditches, floodplains, moist woodlands, and power line corridors. Stiltgrass often thrives in soils that are moist, acidic to neutral, and fertile. Stiltgrass also threatens wooded areas where tree canopies are defoliated due to infestations of gypsy moths or other destructive events. In residential areas, stiltgrass can invade lawns, landscape beds, and vegetable gardens. Stiltgrass does not proliferate in full sunlight or in areas with standing water.

M. vimineum is an annual grass that germinates in the spring, grows to heights of 2 to 3½ feet, and dies back in the fall. Stiltgrass is identifiable by its pale green, lance shaped leaves that have a silvery stripe of reflective hairs along the midrib of the upper leaf surface. The leaves are alternate and range in length from 1 to 3 inches.



Stiltgrass resembles bamboo, but its stems are thin and wiry, and can be green, purple, or brown. In August through early-October, the plants generate slender flower spikes that appear in pairs. After blooming, dry fruits are produced, which are yellow to red in color. In the fall, the plants develop a purplish tinge. At the end of the season, dieback of the plant produces a thick layer of dried, tannish thatch in heavily infested areas.

M. vimineum exhibits several traits common to invasive species, such as rapid growth, abundant seed propagation within one season, and rapid invasion of disturbed habitats. Stiltgrass grows in extensive patches, displacing less competitive native species. The roots of stiltgrass are shallow, but rooting from stem nodes that touch the ground facilitates its spread.

Each plant can produce up to 1,000 seeds from both self-fertilizing and cross-fertilizing flowers. Once in the soil, seeds can remain viable for up to 5 years. The seeds are small and easily adhere to clothing, shoes and animal fur, which aid the spread of *M. vimineum* along woodland pathways, lawns and gardens. Deer and other grazing animals further enable infestation by feeding on native plants and avoiding the stiltgrass. Additionally, overgrazing of the understory of a forest canopy by animals improves light conditions and removes plant competition for the invasion of *M. vimineum*. Once established, *M. vimineum* may impact surrounding plants by increasing shade. Left unchecked, native vegetation in susceptible areas can be overtaken in three to five years.

Several native grasses resemble Japanese stiltgrass, so before applying any control, it is important to correctly identify *Microstegium vimineum*. Native species that stiltgrass can be confused with include Virginia cutgrass (*Leersia virginica*), Pennsylvania knotweed (*Polygonum persicaria*), crabgrass (*Digitaria* spp.), and nimblewill (*Muhlenbergia schreberi*). The identifiers for Virginia cutgrass included its longer leaves (up to 6 inches), its flat, compressed seed heads, and the fact that it is a perennial. Knotweed can be identified by its pink calyx and glossy black nutlets. Crabgrass and nimblewill can be differentiated by their stalky stems and branching seed heads.

David/Guy