

Royal treatment

When it came to defending majestic royal palms from royal palm bugs, the right insecticide saved time and trouble

When royal palm trees started looking like the victims of bad haircuts a few years ago, Rick Wilson sought a solution.

As president of Summer Rain Fertilization Company, Margate, FL, which provides landscape care for commercial and residential customers in three South Florida counties, Wilson knew his customers wouldn't stand for unsightly royal palms. The trees line the streets and boulevards of many affluent communities, and, at 50 to 100 ft. tall, provide great visual appeal.

"We started noticing royal palm trees with brown, frizzled fronds about three years ago," says Wilson. "Though the symptoms looked similar to a manganese deficiency, we wanted to make sure before treating. With the help of our local extension service, we learned that the problem was caused by the royal palm bug, a tiny insect that sucks juices from the new fronds as they unfurl, giving the palm tree a withered, shabby look."

A harrowing task

The next dilemma became how to treat the pest. Because the insect lives in the crown of the palm, Wilson had to rent high lifts to carry workers with spray equipment to the tops of the trees. They sprayed the crown, returned to the ground, moved the equipment and repeated the process on the next tree.

"Not only did this procedure take a tremendous amount of time, it also turned into a safety issue," Wilson says. "In certain cases, I had to block off a lane of Interstate 75 so we could move the device from tree to tree, treating each one. I was never comfortable with my guys dangling 60 feet over a busy highway."

In addition, Wilson knew the insecticide he used would only provide control for 90 to 120 days, at which point he would have to retreat. The royal palm bug starts causing problems in late spring but can reinfest trees at any point during the year.

"I can tell when it's May by looking at the royal palm trees," says Wilson. "Discoloration of the center frond is the first sign of royal palm bug activity."

An easier way

When Merit® insecticide by Bayer Corporation received registration for control of royal palm bug, Wilson tried it immediately. He had successfully used the product for control of scales, aphids and other pests. He soon realized the advantages it had in controlling royal palm bugs.

"First, it can be applied to the root zone



A Summer Rain employee applies insecticide to the root base of a royal palm tree.

as a soil drench so we don't have to rent high lifts," Wilson says, referring to the product's systemic properties which allow it to be taken up by the root and translocated through the tree to the crown. "Second, it provides excellent, long-term control of the royal palm bug, which means we don't have to make so many repeat treatments, and we don't have the safety issues or the hassles of the extra equipment."

Summer Rain crews apply Merit at 0.5 to 1.0 oz. per five gallons of water per tree where the insects live. Wilson's team makes

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preventive treatments any time between October and February so the material has time to work its way through the tree by spring, when the insect is most active.

Total care program

Based on his experiences with royal palm bug and other tree problems, Wilson stresses a total tree care program. "We don't take contracts unless the whole package is included," he says. "If a tree isn't fed properly, it will be much more susceptible to insects and stress. We advocate a minimum of four applications a year with proper palm fertilizer and micronutrients."

As his business grows, Wilson accepts new properties with existing problems, such as royal palm bug infestations. Recently, he took on an exclusive housing development where the royal palms were visibly harmed. His crews applied Merit and initiated fertility treatments. Wilson told the client to have patience because a complete turnaround could take up to a year. But it didn't take quite that long.

"We did a drive-through about 60 days later and could already see improvement," he noted. "The outside fronds still show injury, but the center frond is healthier and greener. The bad crewcut is no longer there, and my client has hope!"

A royal pain

Royal palm bugs were menacing majestic royal palm trees on affluent South Florida properties managed by Rick Wilson and his company, Summer Rain.

His dilemma:

- ▶ Royal palms range from 55 to 100 feet tall
- ▶ Royal palm bugs feed on the crown at the top of the trees
- ▶ High lifts were needed so crew members could spray trees individually
- ▶ Retreatment was necessary within 90 to 120 days

His solution:

- ▶ Merit insecticide to control royal palm bugs up to one year because it requires no special equipment, and can be applied as a soil drench and can be used as a preventive fall treatment before bugs strike in spring

Key client:

- ▶ City of Weston, developed on muckland soil
- ▶ Encompasses 575 acres and 800 royal palm trees
- ▶ Royal palm bugs infested trees, causing brown, frizzled fronds
- ▶ Wilson turned around royal palm bug problem using treatments and proper fertilization