

Stinging and Venomous Caterpillars¹

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This fact sheet is included in *SP134: Pests in and around the Florida Home*, which is available from the IFAS Extension Bookstore. <http://ifasbooks.ifas.ufl.edu/p-154-pests-in-and-around-the-florida-home.aspx>

Introduction

The four major stinging caterpillars occurring in Florida are the puss caterpillar, saddleback caterpillar, Io moth caterpillar and hag caterpillar. Some less common ones also occur in the state. These caterpillars do not possess stingers, but have spines (nettling hairs) that are connected to poison glands. Some people experience severe reactions to the poison released by the spines and require medical attention. Others experience only an itching or burning sensation.

First Aid

Place clear tape over the affected area and strip off repeatedly to remove spines. Apply ice packs to reduce the stinging sensation, and follow with a paste of baking soda and water. If the victim has a history of hay fever, asthma or allergy, or if allergic reactions develop, contact a physician immediately.

Saddleback Caterpillar

This is a very unusual and striking insect. It is brown with a green back and flanks, on which there is a brown, oval, central area that usually is bordered with white. The brown spot looks like a saddle, and the green area looks like a saddle blanket; hence, the common name (Figure 1). It may exceed an inch in length and is stout-bodied. The primary nettling hairs are borne on the back of paired fleshy

1. This document is SP 107, one of a series of the Department of Entomology and Nematology, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. This document is available for sale as a high-quality, color publication. For ordering information or to order using VISA or MasterCard, call 1-800-226-1764. Date first printed: January 1992. Revised July 2011. Please visit the EDIS website at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.
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Figure 1. The saddleback caterpillar

protuberances toward the front and hind ends of the body. There is also a row of smaller stinging organs on each side. This caterpillar feeds on many plants, including hibiscus and palms.

Puss Caterpillar



Figure 2. Puss caterpillar larva is convex and stout-bodied.

The larva is convex and stout-bodied, almost 1 inch long when mature, and completely covered with gray to brown hairs (Figure 2). Under the soft hairs are stiff spines that are attached to poison glands. When touched, these poisonous spines break off in the skin and cause severe pain. Puss caterpillars feed on a variety of broadleaf trees and shrubs, and are most often found on oaks and citrus. In Florida there are two generations a year, one in spring and the

other in fall. Natural enemies keep these caterpillars at low numbers during most years, but they periodically become numerous.

Io Moth Caterpillar



Figure 3. Io moth caterpillar is a pale green.

This is a pale green caterpillar with yellow and red stripes (Figure 3). It often exceeds 2 inches in length and is fairly stout-bodied. The nettling organs are borne on fleshy tubercles, and the spines are usually yellow with black tips. They feed on a wide range of plants, but ixora and rose are their favorite hosts.

Hag Caterpillar



Figure 4. Hag caterpillar is light to dark brown.

This caterpillar is light to dark brown. It has nine pairs (sometimes fewer) of variable-length, lateral spines, which bear the stinging hairs. These spines are curved, twisted and likened by some to the disheveled hair of a hag, for which it is named. It is found on various forest trees and ornamental shrubs, but is not as common as the other stinging caterpillar species (Figure 4).

Buck Moth Caterpillar



Figure 5. Buck moth caterpillar is yellow-brown to purplish-black.

This is a large caterpillar, 1¾ inch to 2¼ inch long when mature. It is yellow-brown to purplish-black with many small white spots and a reddish head. It feeds on oak, willow and other deciduous plants (Figure 5).



Figure 6. Spiny oak-slug caterpillar, *Euclea delphinii*.

Spiny Oak-slug Caterpillar

The caterpillar is pale green and about ¾ of an inch long when mature. Favorite food plants include oak, willow and other deciduous plants (Figure 6).

Flannel Moth Caterpillar



Figure 7. Mature flannel moth caterpillar.

This caterpillar is about 1 inch long when mature. Stinging hairs are intermixed with soft hairs in diffuse tufts. Larvae are creamy white, turning dark as they mature (Figure 7). They feed on oak and various other shrubs and trees.