

# PRETTY, BUT VENOMOUS - STINGING CATERpillARS!

By Ralph E. Mitchell, Director/Horticulture Agent - UF/IFAS Extension Service, Charlotte County

When you think of caterpillars, you think of worm-like leaf-eaters that are generally harmless to humans. Caterpillars may be hairless, fuzzy like a woolly bear, or even tufted with hair. But have you ever heard of **stinging caterpillars** in Florida? Several reports have come into our office recently about encounters with these fuzzy stingers in the landscape. You need to be aware of at least five different types of stinging caterpillars in our part of Florida.

Technically, these caterpillars don't "sting" but instead have spines that are attached to poison glands. Some people who touch these caterpillars experience itching or burning; others may have severe reactions that require medical attention. Some of these caterpillars such as the **Saddleback caterpillar** give a clue that they may be dangerous with warnings of bright colors and bristly hairs. This insect is brown with a green saddle blanket-like mid-section outlined in white. A brown gap in the center, again outlined in white, looks like a saddle. Stinging hairs are attached on front and back projections and

on the lower sides. Saddlebacks may be found on hibiscus and palms.

Another strange venomous caterpillar is called the **Puss caterpillar**. One inch in length, these gray or brown creatures are totally covered in what appears to be soft hair. Severe pain can be the result of touching this caterpillar when toxic spines break off in the skin. Keep an eye out for them on citrus and oaks.

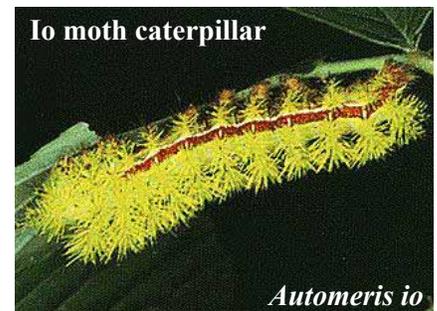
**Io moth caterpillars** are another brightly colored and spiny looking larva. These large caterpillars are pale green with yellow and red stripes and seem to be the **most common** venomous caterpillar found in Charlotte County. Their spines are yellow with black tips and occur on fleshy bumps covering the body. Ios may be found feed-

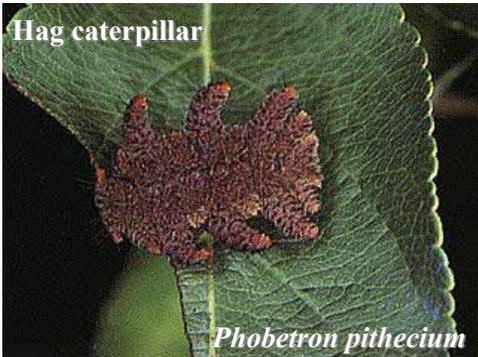
ing on ixoras and roses, but also like a variety of other plants as food. The adult is a colorful and stunningly beautiful moth.

The **Hag caterpillar** is a really weird-looking stinging caterpillar - these really look like trouble! With curved and twisted projections covered with stinging hairs, hags speak volumes with their appearance – DON'T TOUCH ME! While not as common as other stinging caterpillars, they may be found on various native and ornamental woody plants.

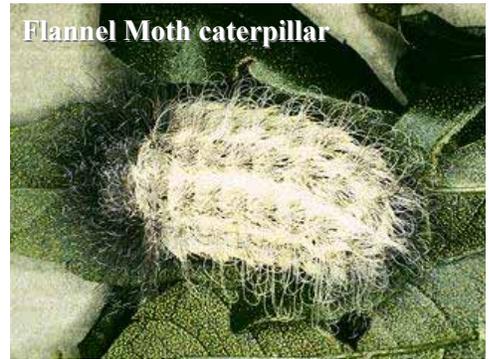
The **Flannel Moth caterpillar** is a final type that you may run into. In fact, it appears to be the type that customers have most often brought into our office for identification this past year. These caterpillars are white, but turn a dark color as they mature and are about one-inch long when mature. As with all of the other stinging caterpillars, the stinging hairs are mixed in with the soft hairs. Look out for the flannel moth caterpillar on oaks and various other shrubs and trees.

While avoiding these insects in





the first place is the best advice, the literature suggests that if a person is stung, placing common transparent tape over the affected area and stripping off the irritating hairs that stick to the tape will help. Applications of ice and a baking soda and water paste will help relieve the pain. As mentioned earlier, if the person stung has a history of allergies, asthma or allergic reactions, consult a doctor/emergency room immediately.



photos courtesy of <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>

**Resource:**

Koehler, P.G. & Oj, F.M. (2007), *Stinging or Venomous Insects and Related Pests*. UF/IFAS Extension Service.

Short, D.E., Habeck, D.H. & Castner, J.L. (2005) *Stinging and Venomous Caterpillars*. UF/IFAS Extension Service.

For more information on all types of stinging creatures, please contact our Master Gardeners on the Plant Lifeline at 941.764.4340 from 1:00pm-4:00pm Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Our office is located at 25550 Harbor View Road, Suite 3, in Port Charlotte. Our Plant Clinics are available across the county:

- **Demonstration Garden** (6900 Florida Street, PG) Thursdays 9:00am-11:00am.
- **Englewood/Charlotte Public Library** Thursdays 10:00am-1:00pm.
- **Mid-County Regional Library** 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Thursday of month 1:00pm-3:00pm.
- **Edison College Learning Resources Library** 3<sup>rd</sup> Tuesday of month 1:00pm-4:00pm.

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For more information about our Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program, please contact our FYN Horticulture Program Assistant, Allison Steele, at 941.764.4351. Allison can help educate you about the Florida Yards & Neighborhoods Program so that you can create a beautiful, Florida-Friendly landscape that saves you time and money while conserving precious water resources and reducing pollution.