

THE SNOWBUSH AND THE SPANWORM

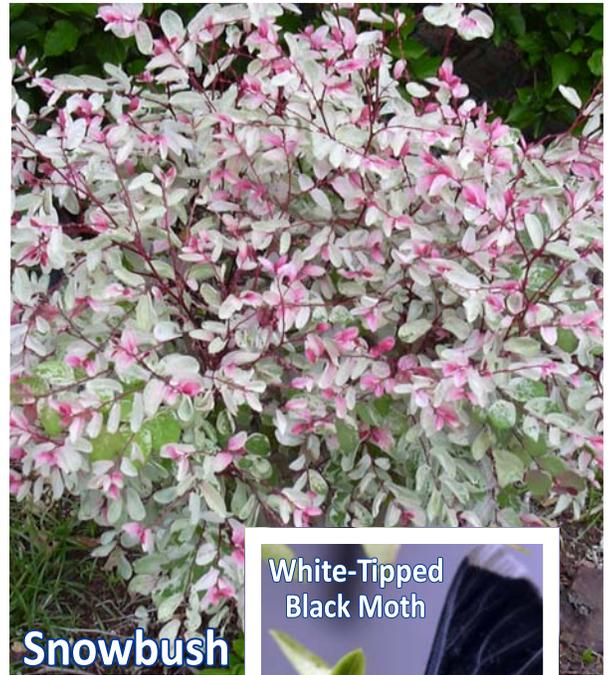
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Do you have a snowbush in your landscape? It is a fairly common and attractive shrub that decorates many residential and commercial landscapes in Charlotte County. Closely related to poinsettias and crotons, these shrubs have attractive variegated white, green and pinkish-red colored foliage that really catches the eye. However, for every plant there is often an accompanying pest and the snowbush has such a nemesis - the snowbush spanworm! This colorful and curious insect pest has a habit of defoliating their favorite food - the snowbush - to the disdain of every gardener! Let's take a closer look at the snowbush as a subject for the landscape and how we can protect it from the notorious spanworm.

The snowbush, botanically known as *Breynia*, is available as a five to eight foot-tall rounded shrub with red wiry braches, and as mentioned before, colorful variegated foliage – white and green with a little red/pink. There is also a dwarf form which will stay around two-feet tall. Much of the new growth is whitish to green and white giving the plant its name. Superior as an informal (not severely pruned) hedge, the snowbush will also develop into an almost vase-shape shrub when given enough room. Although not able to tolerate salty conditions, the snowbush has good drought tolerance and will do well even in light sandy soils. Full sun is necessary for good color and dense growth.

So, the snowbush is a recommended plant that will add color and interest to your landscape. However, what about the spanworm? This attractive inch-long greenish-yellow and black caterpillar is the larva of the white-tipped black



photos: www.wikipedia.org

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moth. They are called spanworms because they are really a type of inchworm which makes long, looping advances as it moves. After feeding and often stripping the snowbush of 50% or more of its leaves, (and in some severe cases eating the twigs and bark) the mature larvae move to the ground and pupate. The moth emerges and lays orange eggs on the snowbush stems. Most moths are active at night, but the white-tipped black moth is unusual in that it is a day-flying moth.

As is often the case within natural systems, predators and parasites will help suppress the populations of spanworms for the most part. However, if the damage goes beyond what you can bear in your landscape, consider using a product containing *Bacillus thuringiensis* or Bt, that only kills cater-

pillars. These caterpillars may also be controlled with insecticidal soap or spinosad as per the label directions. As always, before using any pesticide, please make sure to read the label - it is the law! With an average infestation, your snowbush should flush back to normal in short order.

The moral of this story is that there is no perfect plant - there will always be advantages and disadvantages to any landscape subject and pests that cause us some heartache. However, I would still encourage you to check out the snowbush and be willing to monitor for indications of spanworms as any good gardener should.

Resources:

- Gilman, E.F. (1999) *Breynia disticha*. UF/IFAS Extension Service.
- Caldwell, D. (2005) *Snowbush Caterpillar - Spanworm White-tipped Black Moth*. Collier County UF/IFAS Extension Service.
- Culbert, D. (2004) *Snow in the Summer*. Okeechobee UF/IFAS Extension Service.

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