Scales

Scales are immobile insects that suck plant juices from many types of trees, shrubs, and houseplants.

Scale infestations can cause yellowing or premature dropping of leaves, sticky honeydew, and blackish sooty mold. Plant parts can distort or die back, depending on the species and abundance of scales. Management includes proper plant care, conserving natural enemies, and applying less toxic insecticides when needed. Most plants tolerate low to moderate numbers of scales.

What does scale damage look like?

- Damage resembles that of aphids and whiteflies
- Abundant sticky honeydew excreted by soft scales and certain other species
- Black sooty mold growing on the honeydew
- Discolored, distorted, or dying leaves, twigs, or branches, especially with armored scales

What do scales look like?

- As adults, they are immobile with coverings that are 1/5s to 1/4 inch long. Immature scales are small slow-moving bodies called crawlers that have legs which eventually drop off.
- Adults may appear as circular, elongate, or oval discolorations or raised areas on bark, leaves, or fruit.
- Scales lack an obvious head or legs and don't resemble most other insects.

What about pesticides?

- Insecticides are not necessary unless damage from scales is intolerable.
- Avoid insecticides that injure natural enemies.
- For fruit trees and smaller plants, make a well-timed and thorough spray using horticultural oil during the dormant season or when scale crawlers are active in the growing season.
- For intolerable soft scale problems, especially on large trees, consider soil-applied imidacloprid. This material is not effective against some scales, including armored scales, and may cause outbreaks of cottony cushion scale. Always read the label.

What you do in your home and landscape affects our water and health.

- Minimize the use of pesticides that pollute our waterways and harm human health.
- Use nonchemical alternatives or less toxic pesticide products whenever possible.
- Read product labels carefully and follow instructions on proper use, storage, and disposal.

For more information about managing pests, visit ipm.ucanr.edu or your local University of California Cooperative Extension office.