



## FYN Garden Q & A Series

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### FYN Topic: Papaya and Cassava Host Plants for Sphinx Moth

**Question:** What is this little defoliating monster? A five-inch long, green caterpillar with a large eye spot ate almost every leaf off my small potted papaya sapling. I also see a huge brown moth in my yard that may help you identify it. I did relocate the caterpillar to save the papaya. Should I have done that? Or is it going to just keep eating and destroying all my fruit and vegetable plants? Is the moth I see as destructive as the caterpillar? Mel via email

**Answer:** Your leaf-eating monster is the caterpillar which eventually pupates into the large, brown hawk-like, sphinx moth that you see. The moth only lays its eggs on a handful of host plants preferring papaya and cassava. Tiny caterpillars will grow rapidly while leaves remain to be eaten on the papaya. Fully grown, the papaya/cassava hornworm caterpillar, (*Erinnyis alope*) may not make it back to your plant before pupating. Removing the caterpillars by hand is the most effective method of control. You could also move the host plant in a pot into a screened area. If all else fails, start growing mangoes instead. A young sapling that is less than 5 months old probably won't survive having 80% or more of its leaves eaten. Plants in the Euphorbia family like poinsettia and milkweed might attract the moth away from your papaya.

### Useful Links

<http://www.floridayards.org>  
<http://fyn.ifas.ufl.edu>  
<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/>  
<http://lee.ifas.ufl.edu/FYN/FYNHome.shtml>  
<http://gardeningolutions.ifas.ufl.edu>



Hornworm caterpillar (*Erinnyis alope*)

Thomas Becker is an extension agent for the Florida Yards and Neighborhoods (FYN) program at the Lee County Extension Service. Submit questions by calling the Horticulture Help Desk at 239-533-7504 between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. or by emailing [Extgardener@leegov.com](mailto:Extgardener@leegov.com). Visit his Web page at <http://lee.ifas.ufl.edu/FYN/FYNHome.shtml>

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