

Sweet Almond (*Aloysia virgata*), Snowbush (*Breynia nivosa*) and the Snowbush Caterpillar/White-Tipped Black Moth (*Melanchroia chephise*)

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Sweet Almond

Sweet almond, *Aloysia virgata*, is being used more frequently in South and Central Florida. It is a herbaceous large shrub or small tree that is evergreen, semi-evergreen, or deciduous depending on climate or weather conditions. Leaves are opposite, coarse textured, stiff, with scalloped to nearly serrated margins. Flowers are conspicuous on long racemes. They are tiny, white, salverform and emit a sweet almond or vanilla-like fragrance. The fragrance is very strong and permeates the air downwind from a plant.

Snowbush

Snowbush, *Breynia nivosa*, is a frequently seen shrub throughout South Florida. It is planted primarily as a specimen or as a hedge row. The plant is native to the Pacific Islands and will survive as far north as hardiness zone 9b (25°F minimum). Leaves are alternate and entire. Younger leaves especially are variegated with white and other colors. Flowers are small, inconspicuous, and in short clusters.



Sweet almond



Snowbush

Caterpillar/Moth

The yellow and black larva (caterpillar) is the immature stage of the white-tipped black moth, *Melanochroia chephise*. The caterpillar has a looping crawling motion is in the family of moths known as the “inchworm” or “spanworm.” At about an inch long the larva is full-grown and ready to change into a pupa. It enters the ground, near the host plant, or on foliage spins a feeble cocoon and pupates then emerges as a moth. The moth has a wing span that is a little over an inch and has a striking velvety appearance, with navy-blue, black wings and with white margined tips on each of the four wings. It is a day flying moth and there might be repeating generations throughout the year.



Snowbush caterpillar



White-tipped black moth



White-tipped black moth

The Triple Connection

The connections between the sweet almond, snowbush and the insect is based on the mobility and need for sustenance of the latter. The adult moth sucks nectar from the sweet almond, flies to a snowbush where eggs are deposited on the stems. The caterpillars produced are voracious feeders and will quickly strip a snowbush of all its leaves before turning to devour the bark of stems. Stem necrosis often occurs. A plant may recover but repeated generational feedings killed the snowbush hedge row pictured in this publication which stood at about 7 feet tall.



White-tipped black moth nectaring on the blossoms of sweet almond.



Moths fly from sweet almond shrubs to snowbush plants for mating and egg-laying.



Douglas Caldwell

A snowbush caterpillar feeding by the leaf of a snowbush shrub.



Once the snowbush is completely defoliated, snowbush caterpillars will chew on the bark of stems.



A row of defoliated snowbush shrubs caused by the feeding of snowbush caterpillars. Many caterpillars are still present on this row of plants feeding on the bark of the stems. Unable to recover, the plants were later removed.



While the adult white-tipped black moths are nectaring on the sweet almond in the foreground, the immature larval caterpillars are feeding on the defoliated snowbush shrubs in the background, approximately 30 feet away. Early August.

References

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All pictures were taken by Stephen H. Brown excepted where indicated.

This fact sheet was reviewed by Doug Caldwell, Collier County Extension; Peggy Cruz, Lee County Extension.

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