

HYDRANGEA LEAFTIER

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If you have hydrangeas, you may notice odd structures in the plant in mid-May. These bladder-like pouches at the ends of branches are made up of cupped leaves tied together with silk and are formed by the hydrangea leaftier caterpillar (*Olethreutes ferriferana*). The hydrangea leaftier is common throughout eastern North America, from Maine to North Carolina.



Bladder-like structure made of leaves cemented together by the Hydrangea Leaftier. A. Hazelrigg

The small brown and white patterned adult moth emerges in the spring and lays eggs on the ends of hydrangea branches. The white pattern on the moth resembles bird droppings, protecting the moth from predation by birds. After the eggs hatch in the spring, the small translucent green caterpillars with shiny black heads cement the terminal leaves together with silk thread. The tied leaves stop expanding and become wrinkled. If you pull apart the leaves, you will find a very hungry caterpillar along with little dark green frass pellets. After feeding inside the pouch for a few weeks and growing to about a half an inch, the caterpillar drops to the soil and pupates to emerge as the moth next spring, completing the lifecycle. The hydrangea leaftier has only one generation per season, so no new leaf-nests will appear but those formed earlier will remain visible for the rest of the season. This minor pest causes no real damage to the overall health of the bush so no pesticides are warranted. Plus, the little caterpillars are very protected within their shelter so contact insecticides would be of no use. You could handpick the structures if they are unsightly or mechanically squish the pest before it pupates. If you see these on your hydrangeas, be sure to quiz the kids to have them guess what is inside and then show them!



Small translucent green hydrangea leaf-tier caterpillar feeding inside the leaves. A. Hazelrigg

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