

## WHITEFLY DESTROYING VEGETATION IN SOUTH FLORIDA –

### HOW TO HELP YOUR LANDSCAPE COPE

Ficus trees and hedges throughout South Florida have been hard hit by the Ficus Whitefly, which causes the leaves to turn yellow and drop from the plant. The pest is new to the continental US and has been found mainly infesting ficus, weeping fig, banyan trees, stragler fig, fiddle-leaf fig and banana-leaf fig; all species of ficus.

The underside of infested leaves look as though they are dotted with small, silver or white spots. The insects feed on the underside of the leaves with their “needle-like” mouthparts, and can seriously injure the host plants causing wilting, yellowing, stunting growth, leaf drop and even death.

#### **Controlling Infestation:**

Efforts to understand and control this pest are still ongoing but there are several options currently available.

- Monitor ficus plants for early signs of infestation which will be easier to manage (prior to defoliation); look for the specks on the underside of leaves.
- Insecticidal soap or oil sprays are effective for small trees or shrubs – coverage of the undersides of leaves is especially important. It is necessary to repeat applications every 7-10 days. If hedges are trimmed, bag clippings to reduce spreading insects.
- Once infestation has been removed, feed with fertilizer to assist foliage in recovery.

#### **Preserving Landscape Not Infected –**

The current recommendation is to:

- Drench the soil around the base of the tree or hedge with a product that contains a neonicotinoid compound (you can ask at your garden supply). These products can provide sufficient control for 4-8 months depending on the size of the tree or shrub.
- Monitor plants 3 months after application for the presence of nymphs. This can also be applied to treat “hot spots” or get quick knockdown, in addition to the soil applications, but should not be applied to all of the foliage. The soil application will provide the longest control.

\*\* These applications are recommended to be done by a professional pest control service. All but one brand of the chemicals require a license to purchase. An experienced, licensed landscape contractor could also make the application.

**City maintained landscaping has also been affected** –Some trees and hedges in the city rights-of-way have been damaged by this pest. Crews have and continue to apply sprays to control the whitefly and minimize further injury. There are cases where nymphs were already active on the ficus before it completely absorbed the pesticides. The damaged hedges have been treated with fertilizer and plant stimulants to help the ficus recover and regenerate as quickly as possible. As we are in the semi-dormant time of year, they will take a bit longer to heal. The liquid applications will be repeated as necessary until the plant has fully recovered and once again provides the same buffer for residents as before. This process is faster and more economical than installing new material and waiting for it to mature and provide a similar buffer size.