

Farmer Fact Sheet 31: Taro Cluster Caterpillar



What is it?

A pest of taro and many other crops: cabbages, chilli, corn, eggplant, okra, rice, tomatoes and watercress. The scientific name is *Spodoptera*.

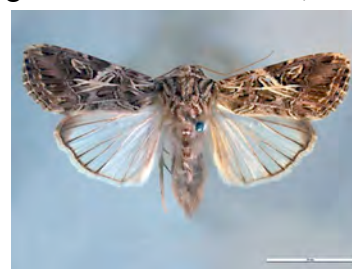
What damage does it do?

The caterpillars do the damage. After hatching, the young caterpillars stay together, stripping the leaf surface as they spread out (photo, left). Later, they live alone, eating all parts of the leaf, including the leaf stalks. Mostly, the caterpillars feed at night.

Normally, natural enemies control the caterpillars. Outbreaks occur, especially after cyclones when natural enemies are destroyed. These outbreaks can be severe.

How do I identify it?

Look for the egg masses: they are white and easily seen. Look for 'scratch' marks on the leaf surface left by the newly hatched caterpillars (photo, top right). Look for the older caterpillars at night (photo, lower centre). They chew large areas of the leaf and, when numerous, they can destroy the whole plant. Adult moth has a wingspan of 30-40 mm (photo, right).



How do I manage the cluster caterpillar?

The caterpillars are normally controlled by small wasps.

Cultural control:

- Destroy egg masses and young caterpillars by rubbing them with your hand or another leaf. If caterpillars are many, and damage looks likely, allow chickens into the garden. Plant flowers, such as *Coleas*, to give food to the natural enemies.

Chemical control:

- Pesticides are not recommended, as they will kill natural enemies. If they are needed, use chilli, derris, neem, pyrethrum, or those containing bacteria, such as spinosad (Success) and Bt – *Bacillus thuringiensis kurstaki*.