



(Front row from left) Dr. Bob Whitson, Interim Associate Director-State Operations, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension, Janet Laminack, Dr. Mengmeng Gu, Dr. Yu Zhang and Dr. Parr Rosson, AgriLife Extension interim director. (Top row from left) Dr. Mike Merchant, Laura Miller and Erfan Vafaie.

Vafaie recognized for efforts to mitigate crape myrtle bark scale

Writer: Adam Russell, 903-834-6191, adam.russell@ag.tamu.edu

Contact: Erfan Vafaie, 903-834-6191, erfan.vafaie@ag.tamu.edu

VERTON – Erfan Vafaie, a Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service entomologist and integrated pest management program specialist in Overton, is among a six-person team recognized with an AgriLife Extension Superior Service Award for educational efforts related to controlling crape myrtle barks scale.

Along with Vafaie, additional AgriLife Extension team members were Dr. Mengmeng Gu, ornamental horticulturist and Dr. Yu Zhang, economist, both in College Station; Dr. Mike Merchant, entomologist, Dallas; Laura Miller, agent, Tarrant County; and Janet Laminack, agent, Denton County.

The team received the award for its response to clientele needs regarding crape myrtle bark scale infestations and subsequent positive outcomes for growers and homeowners over the past five years, according to the award nomination.

The nomination noted crape myrtles are an important crop for growers in Texas, but consumers are shying away from buying them due to bark scale. It stated the difficulty of finding alternative summer flower trees is also a big concern for green industry professionals. With an annual wholesale value of \$66 million, crape myrtle is the top-selling flowering tree in the U.S.

The crape myrtle bark scale team was established in 2013 when concerns about the invasive species' infestations in Texas increased significantly.

The team monitored pest numbers over the past two years to help determine crape myrtle bark scale's seasonal life cycle and peak crawler activity. The data collected has helped researchers develop strategies to fight the pest.

The nationally recognized team adopted a multi-faceted methodology to address objectives and educated stakeholders about chemical and non-chemical integrated pest management, bark scale alternative hosts and feeding preferences for future plant selection and development. They also addressed consumer demand, industry preferences and barriers to crape myrtle sales related to crape myrtle bark scale.

"The CMBS Team has made significant impact and outcomes, educating clientele about crape myrtle bark scale biology, its identity, spread in the U.S., impact on crape myrtles, alternative hosts and control strategies, through diverse forms of online, publication and face-to-face presence of outreach," the nomination stated. "The information has contributed to clientele's knowledge gain and decision making."

Vafaie said he was honored to be part of the "great team of specialists" recognized for their work. He said the support they received from funding agencies, growers and colleagues outside the state helped make their effort successful.

"The reason we received the award is unfortunate because the damage by crape myrtle bark scale was significant and the potential for damages in the future remains," he said. "But hopefully our work and continued efforts to mitigate this invasive pest will subvert its future impacts on growers and homeowners."