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Campbell Vaughn: Poor Max felt the sting of a venomous insect called a puss caterpillar

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Poor Max. All he was doing was helping clean up from the Labor Day weekend before everyone traveled home from a fun-filled weekend of food, football and a little boating.

We all have a system of cleaning up after our pilgrimage down to Shellman's Bluff on the Georgia marsh. Dink and I usually get the boat out of the water to clean and Alison gives orders to anyone within her range. My guess is that Max just happened to be walking by and was handed a bag of trash to take out the Herbie Curbie. Max leaned on something and felt a nasty sting. The culprit was found, its picture taken and the photo shown to the only extension agent at the Riverhouse at the time, which just happens to be me.

The perpetrator in the photo was a cute little fuzzy caterpillar that would almost make a little kid want to adopt it. If you remember Cousin It from the Addams Family, that is a good comparison of how it looks. I knew immediately from the picture that it was a puss caterpillar (*Megalopyge opercularis*) and poor Max was not going to have a pleasant afternoon.

The puss caterpillar is the instar (a developmental stage of the metamorphosis of some insects) of the southern flannel moth which is somewhat common in late summer and early fall. The puss feeds on oaks, persimmon, pecans and other shrubs. The reason they look cute is because they have hairs, but the hairs are very deceptive. The hairs are what are referred to as urticating because they are actually made of a spiny barb that breaks off inside the skin when touched. Adding insult to injury, the spines are poisonous and are considered one of the most painful in the US caterpillar world. Again, poor Max.

To treat the sting, we used sticky tape to try and remove the spines. We added some cold compresses and Benadryl. We also applied a hydrocortisone cream. Max seemed to survive this sneak attack pretty well, but said the pain went from his arm all the way up to his chest. Luckily, the pain subsided in a few hours, but occasionally the pain from a puss caterpillar

sting can last a couple of days and can include nausea. If the reaction does last a couple of days, a doctor needs to be called.

Campbell Vaughn: Now is the time to start preparing your lawns for cooler weather

The reason I decided to write about these stinging caterpillars is one: My poor 15-year-old buddy got a nasty sting from one. And two: I saw a picture of a man on a gardening website yesterday holding another stinging caterpillar in his bare hand asking for help trying to identify it. His post wasn't of a puss caterpillar, but two saddleback caterpillars (*Acharia stimulea*) that were eating some of his garden.

The saddleback is really cool looking because it has these brown spiky horns with fuzzy little legs and a green "saddle" with a brown spot on its back. The saddleback is the larval stage of the slug moth. It is also a urticating caterpillar with two types of venom. One venom is hemolytic that breaks down red blood cells and the other is a vesicating venom which causes blistering. Nasty little guys if they want to be.

I am really hoping that the guy who was holding the two saddlebacks didn't end up having a miserable night after handling those "cute" little caterpillars because it sure didn't look like he was going to make it out unscathed. Be careful on what you grab and keep an eye out for kids in the garden. Max would probably agree that you don't want to go what he went through.