

CONTROLLING INSECTS ON HOUSEPLANTS

by Gordon Sheldon, Rome Garden Club

Now that the exterior gardening season is drawing to a close and seed catalogues have not yet begun to arrive, it seems like the ideal time to do a few articles on houseplants. Many people have a few houseplants, and a few people have a great many houseplants. Whether we have a few or a lot, they help to purify the air by absorbing carbon dioxide and releasing oxygen.

Fortunately, many of the plants we grow as houseplants are immune or resistant to the few insects which infest our plants. Others seem to attract them like a magnet. Impatiens, for example, is seldom bothered by insects outdoors, but if brought in to grow as houseplants, they will quickly develop an infestation of spider mites and other pests.

APHIDS: are common insects on houseplants. They are tiny, soft-bodied pear-shaped insects, usually green and wingless. The mouth is a hollow beak on the underside of the head. It is used to pierce plant tissue and suck out the sap. When present in large numbers, a sticky substance which they excrete may be seen on some plant leaves. They are very prolific, and if not controlled, can build up a large population in a very short time. Symptoms of their presence are malformed and discolored new leaves and clusters of the insects on new leaves, stems, and flower buds. They can usually be controlled by spraying the host plant with an insecticide soap or Malathion. There is also a systemic insecticide which is worked into the soil and watered in. It is taken up by the plant, making the sap poisonous to insects. If using a spray, two or three applications may be needed to kill those insects which hatch out after the first spraying.

MEALYBUGS: are more common insects on plants indoors. They are small insects, but they cover themselves with a white waxy excretion, which looks like a small cotton ball. A small infestation can be controlled by touching each one with a cotton swab wet with rubbing alcohol. For bad infestations, use a houseplant spray labeled for mealybugs, or use a systemic insecticide. Females deposit hundreds of eggs in a white, fluffy mass, and the young nymphs crawl over the plant. They are often found in the axis of leaves and stems. They suck the sap and produce a sticky honeydew that may coat some leaves.

SCALE INSECTS: are similar to mealybugs, but their coating is hard and looks like a miniature turtle. Stems and leaves may have many brown bumps that can be scraped off. There are many types of scale, and some make a white cottony covering like mealybugs. Some lay eggs and others bear live young which may live under the adult's shell for a brief time until they stake out a spot. They then insert their beaks in the plant and start sucking sap. They excrete a shell, lose their legs and remain in the same place from then on. Males of mealybugs and scale have wings, but no mouthparts, and die after mating. A Malathion spray is effective on the young, and a systemic insecticide watered into the soil will eliminate most all of them.

SPIDER MITES: are very insidious insects when they infest your houseplants. They often make a web over new growth, leaves and flower buds--and the tiny insects are difficult to see. Hold a white paper under a suspect plant and shake or tap it. If mites are present, they will be seen as tiny specks moving on the paper. They suck sap from leaves and buds, causing them to yellow and drop off. They can be washed off with a spray of water, but new populations can build up rapidly. A house plant spray labeled as a miticide and applied at least three times at weekly intervals should keep them under control.

WHITEFLIES: are small sucking insects with dull white wings. They fly out in a cloud when a plant is disturbed. Oval minute eggs are attached to the undersides of leaves. Crawlers hatch out and start feeding. After molting twice, the adult fly emerges. Any good house plant spray will kill them.

FUNGUS GNATS: The adult is a small flying insect which looks similar to a fruit fly. The adults do little damage but can be annoying when present in large numbers. They lay eggs in the soil, and the small maggot-like worms feed on fungi, which is found on organic material. When present in large numbers, they may damage the roots of young seedlings. Drenching the soil with an insecticide labeled for use on plants should control them.

Gordon Sheldon is a member of the Rome Garden Club, New York. Gordon received an award for Horticultural Journalism at the Annual Rome Garden Club Awards Banquet on Monday, October 23, 2000. Sheldon's daughter writes, "We are very proud of all his accomplishments! "

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