

Some effective ways to protect your houseplants from pesty insects



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Most insect pests on houseplants are brought in with the plants, either directly from a nursery or from our patios or back yards. Once in the sheltered environment of the home, with no severe weather or natural enemies to contend with, they can multiply rapidly. To avoid severe damage to plants, proper identification and prompt treatment are vital.

Here's how to identify and control the most common pests:

- **Mealybugs:** These tiny white, oval-shaped insects congregate in cottony masses on leaves; stems and in the crotches where leaves are attached to the stems. They suck the juices from the plant, causing the leaves to become discolored and distorted. If not controlled, mealybugs can kill the host plant.

Control mealybugs by dabbing them with a cotton swab dipped in rubbing alcohol, or by spraying a plant with a solution of superior grade (summer weight) horticultural oil, such as SunSpray Ultra Fine. Insecticides containing pyrethrins and labeled for indoor use can also be effective.

- **Slugs:** Holes chewed in leaves while you are asleep at night can indicate a slug problem. If the plant is not too large, carefully remove it from the pot, then check the outside edges and bottom of the soil ball, especially near the drainage holes and the inner sides of the container. Both slugs and pill bugs like to make this area their home. Also check for holes that lead toward the center of the soil ball.

In most cases, you can remove slugs, snails or pill bugs by hand (or with a small stick or other instrument) and put the plant back into its container.

If the pests are too numerous or the plants too large to treat in this manner, use a soil drench containing an approved houseplant insecticide. Apply enough so that some of the insecticide solution runs out the drainage holes in the container.

- **Spider mites:** Spider mites love the warm temperatures and low humidity indoors. The first sign of their presence is a yellow stippling (tiny yellow dots) on the top side of the leaves. If you hold a white index card under the leaves and thump the upper leaf surface with your finger, you will jar some of the mites off the leaf and onto the card, where they are easier to see. Look for tiny dots scurrying around on the paper.

If a mite infestation is severe, webbing will be visible around the affected leaves and the leaves will wither and die.

Control spider mites with superior grade horticultural oil or with a specific miticide labeled for use on indoor plants.

- **Aphids:** If you see new leaves that are discolored, distorted and smaller than normal, check the plant for aphids. These tiny, oval-shaped insects mass on young, tender stems, leaves and flower buds. They suck the plant sap. Aphids can be green, black or yellow, and — regardless of color — multiply rapidly.

Control aphids with a superior grade horticultural oil or a houseplant insecticide containing pyrethrins.

- **Whiteflies:** These tiny white insects feed on the underside of leaves, causing mottling or yellowing. The adults will fly away from the plant when disturbed. White-



Mealy bugs (left) suck the juices from a plant, causing its leaves to become discolored and distorted. White flies (right) cause mottled or yellowed leaves.

flies secrete a sticky liquid called honeydew, on which a form of sooty mold can develop.

Control whiteflies with superior grade horticultural oil or with a houseplant insecticide containing pyrethrins or resmethrin.

● **Fungus gnats:** Unless present in large numbers, fungus gnats are more of a nuisance than a hazard to plants. These small dark insects fly around when disturbed and can also be seen running across the top of the soil. They prefer potting mixes that are highly organic and breed in the top 1/2 inch or so of soil. Potting soil that is kept too moist encourages fungus gnat infestation.

Removing and replacing the top 1/2 to 1 inch of soil can help solve a fungus gnat problem, as can more careful watering. Allow the top 1/2 to 1 inch of soil to dry out between waterings. Wetting the soil with an insecticide containing diazinon, carbaryl or pennethrin will kill the pests.

When using any insecticide for controlling insects on houseplants, be sure the specific plant is listed on the product label, and follow all label directions. In most cases, more than one treatment will be necessary to achieve satisfactory control.

If the plant is not too large to move, place it outdoors to treat (temperature and weather permitting) or in the bathtub or shower stall.

Avoid getting sprays, especially oils, on furniture or carpeting. Also, do not spray plants that are close to windows while they are exposed to direct sunlight through the glass.