



# What's Bugging Your Houseplant?

## Fungus Gnats:

- These are tiny black flies with clear wings. Usually seen flying around the plants, windowsill and computer screens. They often sneak indoors through open doors or windows and breed in the damp soil of houseplant containers. Adults may lay up to 300 eggs at a time, which hatch a week later into tiny, threadlike larvae. The larvae feed on fungus and rotting vegetation in the soil. When their population outgrows their food source, they may even eat tiny plant roots. After feeding for 2 weeks, they pupate into adults. The adults only live for 10 days but in that time they mate and find a suitable place to lay more eggs.
- **Control:** The first thing is to try to allow the soil to dry out between watering. Fungus gnats need constant moisture to survive. If problems persist, try trapping the adults with yellow sticky trap placed near the soil level of the plant and near a light that will be left on at night. To trap larvae, push a slice of raw potato into the soil, which attract the larvae. Gather the potato pieces and dispose of them every 2 days. If all else fails the best thing to do is to drench the soil with a special strain of *Bacillus thuringiensis* (BT), or Thuricide.

## Mealy bugs:

- Numerous houseplants are subject to attack by these strange sucking insects, which are often brought in on infested plants. Mealy bugs are experts at hiding in small nooks where leaves join stems, and some species feed on plant roots. Adults look like whitish, cottony blobs or sacks, and are loosely attached to stems, leaves and roots. A white coating on the adults, nymphs, and eggs protects them from spray pesticides. The best way to control is by hand.
- **Control:** Begin by physically removing the mealy bug with a cotton swab dipped in alcohol or vegetable oil to dislodge and collect all the mealy bugs you can find, or take a paper towel that is soaked in soapy water and wipe down the leaves and stems. Pay close attention to areas where the leaves attach to stems-this is a favorite place for them to hide. If you find mealy bugs in the soil, the best thing to do is drench the soil with a solution of 1 Tablespoon of liquid dish soap to 1-gallon water. Make sure it is biodegradable and doesn't have any perfumes or lotions in it. Systemic insecticides may also be used in more advanced cases.
- **Biological Control:** If it becomes serious, a natural predator called the mealybug destroyer can be released and will do a good job of hunting down and killing the mealybugs.

## Scale:

- Scale insects look like brown or white scabs or shells, and attach themselves to leaves and stems and suck the plant's juices. The crawling young are found near the adults, and are usually the same color as the plant. Once the juvenile scale attaches itself to a leaf with its needle-like mouth, it seldom moves. They can infest many types of plants, but tend to be most troublesome on ficus and ferns. The evidence of scale is easy to detect. Affected leaves or stems may be weak and slightly yellow and there is often sticky honeydew on the lower leaves, as well as the surface the plant sits on.
- **Control:** Prevention is key, so using a systemic in the soil works best. It's also advisable to physically remove the bugs whenever possible. Remove or cut off infected areas. Wash the leaves with a paper towel and an oil-based soap like lemon fresh joy or spray with Horticultural oil. Repeat often, in 10-day intervals if possible.



### Spider Mites:

- These are extremely tiny mites that can be red, yellow, black or even clear. They are not true insects but are related to ticks and spiders. They weave a fine web on and around leaves and stems. They love hot, dry conditions and usually hang around south and west windows. The leaves will have a stippled affect if you look closely. Misting around the plant can highlight the location(s) of their web. Distressed plants are more susceptible to mites than healthy ones.
- **Control:** Spider mites multiply very quickly, so it's best to catch them early. Misting plants and putting them on pebble trays will help prevent problems with mites. Use an insecticidal soap or Neem oil to help keep them at bay. Repeat in 5 to 7 day intervals. Make sure to wipe down the windowsill, walls, and shelves that the plant is sitting on, because they will wait there until you bring the plant back and re-contaminate after you have sprayed.
- **Biological control:** If the infestation covers a large area, you may want to consider releasing beneficial mite predators.

### Thrips:

- These are super small, sliver-like insects that are not ordinarily found in houseplants. They are usually found in the flowers of seasonal blooming plants like Chrysanthemums and Dahlias. If the infestation is severe, it can spread to your houseplants. Usually you will see puckered or curled leaves with silvery streaks on them. To identify the insect take a flower or leaf and shake it over a white piece of paper and you will see tiny little lines that move especially if you blow on them.
- **Control:** the easiest way to control them is to wipe them off of the plant. Or use fine spray of water. And repeat in about 5 to 7 days. If they seem to reappear use an insecticidal soap. If they are in the flowers, using a systemic will work. Yellow/blue sticky traps will trap the flying adults and keep them from laying more eggs.

### Whitefly:

- If you have a whitefly infestation you will see little white gnat-like creatures swarm into the air when you water the plant. Unfortunately they can be difficult to kill. But they're usually only attracted to certain plants like Hibiscus, Geraniums and Poinsettias. They tend to attack plants that have veined leaves.
- **Control:** The adults have no mouth parts, so regular insecticides often don't work. But a systemic (put into the soil) will control the larva and can be used to prevent further infestation. You may also physically remove the larva from under the leaves by using a paper towel soaked in soapy water. Pruning out the worst areas works best, and it helps to follow by spraying with a pesticide oil to help smother the larva and adults. Use a yellow sticky trap to keep the adults from laying more eggs.

### Aphids:

- Green or black small sucking insects-usually found in groups on tender growth and under leaves. You may also find their sloughed-off white skin on lower leaves. Leaves will often look curled.
- **Control:** Aphids are relatively simple to control. Clip off infected stem tips, and if only a few are present, remove them with a cotton swab dipped in alcohol. For more severe infestations, wash the plant in a lukewarm shower or take outdoors and spray with soapy water. The spray will dislodge most of the problem. Use an insecticidal soap or an insect spray containing Imidacloprid. Neem can also work when sprayed in 7 to 10 day intervals.