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Hitchhiking Insects on Holiday Plants

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As new plants and living evergreens are brought into homes for the holidays, uninvited guests may hitchhike indoors on these plants.

When fresh cut Christmas trees are brought into warm homes, insects and spiders overwintering on them may become active. The most common are aphids and spiders.

Evergreen pests that become active are considered accidental invaders. They will not harm people, pets or anything in the home. The worst scenario I've been asked about was with aphids. Since they exude honeydew, the gifts beneath this tree had become a bit sticky.

Some tree insects are in the egg stage and if they hatch, they do so in small enough numbers to go unnoticed. Many will desiccate and die from dry indoor air.

Insects found on a tree can usually be ignored until the tree is removed. Any that might leave the tree and be found on ceilings, walls, or windows are best vacuumed or discarded in a tissue.

Christmas trees should not be sprayed with insecticides. Houseplant insecticides may not pose a serious health risk but there is no benefit to exposing people or pets to pesticides that are not needed. Aerosol insect sprays are flammable and should not be sprayed on a Christmas tree.

When selecting holiday plants, inspect the upper and lower leaf surfaces for pests or signs of pests before purchasing. Whiteflies, mealybugs and spider mites are the main concern. These can spread to houseplants and multiply quickly to cause damage.

Whiteflies are tiny and appear like bits of ash fluttering out of a plant when disturbed. Mealybugs are covered with fine white hairs and may be found on leaf undersides or stem joints. They look like tiny pieces of moist cotton. Spider mites are the most difficult to detect. They are tiny specks that feed on leaf undersides. Even their webbing is very fine and mostly on leaf undersides.

Signs of insect infestations include sticky leaves, discolored leaves, and leaf stippling which looks like tiny white or tan specks. Also look for fine webbing, holes in leaves, or eggs. Check containers for signs of pests along edges, rims, the bottom of pots and in saucers.

Whiteflies are a fairly common pest of poinsettia. If brought into the home on infested plants, their populations multiply rapidly and spread to other plants. Adult females can lay between 200 and 400 eggs.

Spider mites may also be found on holiday plants. They too can multiply rapidly in the warm and dry indoor air of most homes, with a new generation possible every 7 days or less.

If a plant is heavily infested, consider discarding it as houseplant pests are extremely difficult to control. For smaller populations, insecticidal soaps or insecticides labeled for use indoors on houseplants may provide some level of control, but are often not effective.

Low insect populations can be managed with nonchemical methods, especially if detected early. This is why checking plants before purchasing and monitoring them closely once in the home is important.

If insects are found after bringing a plant home, isolate it from other plants. Wipe upper and lower leaf surfaces with a damp paper towel and spray plants with water in a sink or shower. Handpick or squish any visible insects. These mechanical controls must be repeated every few days to be effective.

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When using a real evergreen as a Christmas tree, insects overwintering on the tree might become active in the warm indoors. If insects are noticed on a Christmas tree, control of these mostly harmless and temporary invaders should be limited to non-chemical means only. **Aerosol insect sprays are flammable and should not, under any circumstances, be sprayed on a Christmas tree.** Insects found on the tree can be ignored until the tree is removed. Any that might leave the tree and be found on ceilings, walls, or windows are best vacuumed or discarded in a tissue. The majority of insects that might find their way indoors on a Christmas tree will not harm people, pets or wood; and most will not survive indoors for very long, making them a temporary nuisance. So again, for safety, do not spray a Christmas tree with a flammable aerosol insect spray, or other insecticide, if insects are noticed on a real Christmas tree.

While houseplants require fertilization for the best performance, it is best not to fertilize foliage plants during winter. They are semi-dormant and benefit from this rest period. The amount and frequency of fertilization depends on the plant type, available sunlight, potting mix, frequency of watering, and type of fertilizer. As a rule, fertilize actively growing houseplants every two months between March and September. A fertilizer formulation of 5-10-10 or 10-20-10 is fine for most houseplants. Follow label instructions when mixing fertilizer for houseplants. Avoid over-fertilizing, especially plants growing in low-light as these plants require less nitrogen compared to those grown in full sun outdoors. Dried leaf margins and wilted plants are signs of excess fertilizer. Leaching the potting media with water now and then helps remove excess salt and fertilizer buildup. To do this, containers must have drainage holes.

Landscape plants are often mulched. While we know mulch conserves soil moisture and controls weeds during summer, a benefit we may not think about is how mulch protects soil from temperature extremes and how this benefits plants. Mulch keeps soil cooler in summer and warmer in winter. This benefits plants because temperature extremes can kill very fine roots which are responsible for most water and nutrient absorption. While soil temperature extremes rarely kill established plants, they can cause a chronic stress as plants expend energy to generate new fine roots. Modifying soil temperature is especially important near the soil surface, where fine roots can be killed by hot soils in summer and by freezing and frost heaving during winter. The correct use of organic landscape mulch benefits plants year- round. Coarse mulches, like wood chips, tree leaves or recycled greenery, make great mulches.

When the tips and edges of houseplant leaves turn brown, it's usually due to low humidity or fluoride in water. Most houseplants are injured when humidity is under 20 percent. Humidity levels between 40 and 60 percent are preferred for houseplants. The best way to increase humidity is to use a room humidifier or a whole-house humidifier attached to the furnace. Syringing (spraying plants with clean water) removes dirt from leaves and increases humidity, but only to a small degree. High humidity areas such as bathrooms and kitchens are often ideal for plants. Excessive fluoride levels in water can cause tip and leaf scorching. Sensitive plants like *Dracena*, *Cordyline*, and *Chlorophytum* are best watered with rain water if possible. Tap water can be used but let it stand for at least 24 hours in containers to allow chlorine and fluorine to dissipate. When watering houseplant, room temperature water is best.

Thigmomorphogenesis is a very long word, but we witness it happening just about every day in the windy state of Nebraska. When trees are swaying in the wind, or bending under the weight of snow and ice, thigmomorphogenesis is happening. The message here is if you planted a tree a year or longer ago, and it still has staking materials supporting it, it is time to remove the stakes. That is, if you want the tree to be able to sway and bend in the wind and under the weight of ice and snow with less risk of breakage. Trees respond to mechanical loading, such as wind, with a growth response that adds strength to loaded components and reduces the likelihood of failure. If trees are staked tightly, and not allowed to sway in the wind, this will not readily occur and increases the risk of tree failure in a storm. Stake young trees as low as possible on the trunk and for one year only.