



Fungus Gnats

Fungus gnats are small fly-like insects that may be noticed flying around houseplants. They are commonly associated with overwatered houseplants or those grown in poorly drained potting mixes. If a houseplant pot is harboring fungus gnats, treat the soil with insecticidal soap or incorporate diatomaceous earth in the soil to kill the maggots. Another management approach is to cut back on watering so the soil dries out between watering. Any maggots present in the soil will dry out and lack of water will reduce fungal growth, reducing the food supply for adult fungus gnats. A third option is a combination of letting the soil dry between watering and then watering with a solution of water and insecticidal soap.

Fruit flies are common around the house during late summer and early fall. All it takes is an overripe banana, tomatoes ripening on the counter or melon rinds in the wastebasket -- and like magic, fruit flies appear. Winter fruit flies often are not fruit flies at all but rather fungus gnats, which look enough like fruit flies to a casual observer to be confused with them.

Both fruit flies and fungus gnats speed the process of decay of plant matter. Adult fruit flies home in on potential food sources such as overripe fruit or winter squash past its prime, and lay their eggs on it. Maggots hatch in a day or two and commence feeding. As the plant matter breaks down, various fungi start to grow in it. These fungi -- and others growing in houseplant pots, drains and other chronically damp places -- are attractive to fungus gnats, which are every bit as quick as fruit flies to zero in on potential breeding sites. Numbers can increase quickly.

During warm months, both of these insects can enter homes from outdoors. They can easily pass through ordinary window screen. In winter, management can be more successful because you don't have a continuous supply of new recruits to deal with.

If you suspect houseplant pots of harboring fungus gnats or fruit flies, you can treat the soil with insecticidal soap or incorporate diatomaceous earth in the soil to kill the maggots. Another approach is to cut back on watering so the soil dries out between waterings. Any maggots present in the soil will dry out, and lack of water will reduce fungal growth and so reduce the food supply for adult fungus gnats. A third option is a combination of letting the soil dry between waterings and then watering with a solution of water and insecticidal soap.

Household insecticides for flying insects will control fruit flies and fungus gnats, but this is like treating the symptom rather than the cause of an infestation. Eliminate potential breeding habitat instead. Measures that dry or clean out breeding habitat for these insects will also reduce the fungal spore load inside your home and help freshen the air. Both of these can enhance health and comfort while greatly reducing the flying nuisance numbers -- at least until warm weather comes back and activates outdoor populations

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