

SAFELY MANAGING HOUSEPLANT INSECTS

By: Kelly Feehan, Extension Educator

For Release: Week of December 13, 2021

With some plants having been brought indoors for winter, and holiday plants now being purchased, the risk of insects hitchhiking into our home increases.

If an insect is noticed on or near a plant, positively identify it before attempting control. It may only be a nuisance insect and not a plant pest; with swatting being the only control needed.

If an insect is identified as a damaging pest such as white flies, spider mites, or mealy bugs, a variety of methods are best used together to manage the insect. In some cases, the plant may need to be quarantined or destroyed to reduce the risk of insects spreading to other plants.

Tossing a plant might seem extreme but may be the best option for heavily infested plants. Houseplant insect populations expand rapidly due to warm temperatures, lack of predators indoors, and no rainfall to knock insects off and reduce populations. Also, control of indoor insects is challenging.

Control methods include syringing, handpicking or wiping insects off, trapping, sanitation and the use of insecticides. If insecticides are one of the controls chosen, here are safety precautions to follow.

Only use insecticides labeled for use indoors on houseplants. These are sold as ready to use sprays and the label will state the product is for use on houseplants. Such insecticides are ready to use to avoid having to mix pesticides indoors which increases the risk of accidental spills or poisoning.

If an insecticide is a concentrate that has to be mixed with water, it is likely a product that is not labeled for indoor use by homeowners. Always read and follow all pesticide label directions.

When possible, take houseplants outdoors or into a heated shed or garage during winter before spraying to minimize pesticide exposure in the home. Keep plants away from children and pets until the spray had dried.

If using an aerosol, do not apply closer than 18 inches to the plant or plant injury may occur. Avoid treating stressed plants, such as those that are dry, to minimize plant injury.

Some insecticides are systemic, meaning the plant takes up the product and insects ingest the pesticide while feeding on sap. The majority of houseplant pests are sapsucking insects.

Systemic products are usually applied to the soil, then watered in to release the chemical. Take extra care when watering treated plants. Excess water may carry the insecticide out of the container to pool on surfaces where it children and pets might access it.

Insecticides should be a last resort and used along with other control methods. Syringing is washing plants on a regular basis in the shower or with a jet of water to dislodge insects. Small handheld vacuums can be used to reduce insect populations.

Trapping is done with yellow sticky traps which are commercially available or made at home with bright yellow tag board and petroleum jelly. Such traps are hung or placed near plants to monitor for insects and help reduce the number of flying insects like white flies, fungus gnats and winged aphids.

Sanitation ranges from removing and destroying infested plant parts to completely discarding a plant. While it may be difficult to do, heavily infested plants may best be discarded with control methods aimed at other plants in the home.