

Hitchhiking Insects on Holiday Plants

By: Kelly Feehan, Extension Educator

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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.