

Spruce Mites

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Spruce spider mite is a tree pest that is active during cooler spring and fall weather. While many mites prefer hot weather, spruce mites begin to hatch as temperatures warm in spring. Mites feed during April and May, are dormant during summer, then feed again in September and October.

If a spruce, Arborvitae or Juniper have signs of mite damage from last season, begin monitoring for active mites now. Damage is more common on inner branches and areas protected from rain. Once damaged, needles do not recover to turn green again. Damage seen now occurred last spring and fall.

Spruce mites damage needles by sucking out sap with piercing-sucking mouthparts. This causes stippling or white specks on needles and eventual browning. The browning often does not appear until after the mites have gone into summer dormancy. Treating when damage is first noticed but mites are dormant will not be effective.

Other evergreen diseases cause similar symptoms. For this reason, checking for the presence of mites is used for diagnosing the problem before treating. Control options need to be used when mites are active.

To monitor for mites, place a white sheet of paper or a white tray beneath branches with damage. Firmly tap the branch to knock active mites onto the paper or tray. Mites are only one-fiftieth of an inch long, but can be seen crawling on a light-colored background. You can also wipe your hand over the surface. If the specks smear green or reddish, these would be mites and not dust specks.

When ten or more spider mites are consistently tapped from branches and predator numbers are low, treatments may be considered. Predators of mites include lady beetles, lace wings, minute pirate bugs and rove beetles.

Insecticides kill predators. When this happens, the pest population can rebound quicker than the predators and the problem may become worse. This is called pest resurgence and must be taken into consideration when making the decision to apply pesticides, especially insecticides.

If enough active mites are found, spruce and other evergreens can be treated with a vigorous spray of water from a hose. Repeat this every few days during the morning hours. Like all mites, spruce mites thrive during dry conditions so hosing simulates rainfall and helps keep mites in check.

When ten or more mites are consistently found, the water treatment or a miticide could be applied. Most insecticides are ineffective against spider mites, and frequent use of insecticides will promote mite outbreaks by killing mite predators.

Pesticides containing insecticidal soap, growing season horticultural oils, or Spinosad are organic controls that have less impact on predators. Other products to use include those that contain the active ingredients bifenthrin, hexythiazox, spiromesifen or abamectin. All must be applied when mites are active during April and May or September and October. Repeat applications in 7 to 10 days are needed.