

Caring for Pest Problems on Indoor Plants

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Caring for indoor plants: measures you can take for pest problems

This is the time of year when we are spending lots of time inside our homes, and if we detect a pest invading our houseplants or our home, we have a tendency to grab the handiest chemical control and go after them. But, wait! Before you spray, consider the fact that your house is not getting much ventilation this time of year and the interior air quality of our homes during the winter is normally poor. We don't want to worsen our home air quality by adding chemicals to it if we can avoid it. And, if we do need to use a chemical control, let's use the right one for the job and use it properly.

First, consider taking some preventive measures with our house plants by not over-watering our plants or letting fallen leaves accumulate in the pots. Both of these situations encourage pests that thrive in soggy soil environments or feed on dead plant material.

Sometimes just taking the plant outside and giving it a thorough, vigorous spraying with plain water is all that is needed to blow those pests into the great outdoors.

Look closely at both sides of the leaves and examine the stems regularly for pests, so you can handle them before they become a real nuisance and spread to other plants. Giving the pot a little shake or lightly brushing the leaves will disturb common pests such as aphids, whiteflies or fungus gnats and make them more easily detectable. For larger insects or light infestations of mealy bugs or scales, remove them by hand or by using a toothpick.

Common pests such as aphids and mealy bugs can be controlled if detected early by dabbing them with cotton swabs dipped in rubbing alcohol. Heavy infestations on large plants may call for a chemical control as a last resort.

In addition, spraying with an insecticidal soap that is registered for use on houseplants can be effective on most common pests. An exception would be winged adult pests such as whiteflies since they can leave the plant during treatment and return later

When using any kind of organic or chemical treatment, remember that few pesticides are registered for indoor use. Reading the label is always critical, but when you are using a chemical indoors, it becomes even more important. Pets and small children are susceptible to chemical sprays. Even ones that are recommended for indoor use can have objectionable odors and cause allergic reactions. This is especially true when used without adequate ventilation around food preparation.

Every pest control label will contain a list of pests it will control effectively. If the pest you want to control is not on the label, don't waste your time and money trying to make it work.



Left: Aphids thrive in the warm, dry environment of a home and can multiply very quickly, as on this florist cyclamen, which is covered with both adult insects and immature nymphs. Hold the leaves and stems of the plant upside down under a stream of cool running water to remove the insects. Keep the plant away from other houseplants until you are certain that the bugs are gone. **Center:** Aphids are a soft-bodied insect with piercing mouthparts. Both the adults and the nymphs feed on the juices of their host plant causing the leaves or stems to become deformed and withered. The weakened plant will often die from the infestation. **Right:** Be vigilant about checking your houseplants thoroughly for pests, especially the plants that spent the summer on a sunny deck. Bugs that might not have survived the winter temperatures outside will think your home is a tropical paradise for breeding. Photos by *Christine Farrow / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners*.

The label will give you information on the hazards associated with using the product. Please don't assume this is "boilerplate" information. You would be surprised by the scope of the hazards. Some of the most seemingly benign organic controls recommend safety glasses because of possible eye damage. Some are also flammable.

The label will also have disposal and storage information. Because the most cost efficient way to use chemicals is by purchasing concentrates and diluting them, proper storage is vital and will mean the difference between an effective product or one that has become useless. Using a control that has lost its potency by being improperly stored is a waste of your money and time.

Proper disposal of chemicals is essential in the protection of our ground water as well as both domestic and wild animals. Always follow the label instructions for proper disposal of unused products or their empty containers.

When mixing concentrates, **read the directions completely and then read them again.** Take your time and be sure you understand the instructions completely. If you have questions, the product will provide contact information for questions.

Every label plainly states that the company is not liable for damage or injury resulting from misuse of their product. The bottom line is: **The label is the law.**

RESOURCES:

- *Household Insects and Their Control*. Publication #EB0472, Cooperative Extension Washington State University
- *Sustainable Gardening*, Publication #8742, Cooperative Extension Washington State University