

Spittlebugs

Walk through your garden in spring and look for blobs of white foamy froth on plants. The culprits are spittlebugs, also known as froghoppers. There are many species of spittlebugs prevalent in North America. Each species attacks a distinct type of plant, such as alfalfa, clover, holly, juniper, pine, or strawberry. Adult spittlebugs look and travel like leafhoppers. The adult spittlebug is only about 1/4 inch long and is mottled gray or brown. They lay eggs in late summer in the angle between a leaf and stem. The eggs hatch in spring, producing a small pale green nymph. These nymphs mature over the summer into adults, and the cycle begins again.

The froth ("spittle") you see is a coating produced by the nymph to protect it from dry air and predators. The froth and nymphs will be present for one to two months, starting in April or May. Bodily secretions and air forced from an abdominal gland make the frothy bubbles. Underneath the froth, the nymph feeds on tender new growth of leaves, stems, and buds.



Spittle on Chrysanthemums



Spittle on an Aster

Damage to mature plants by spittlebug nymphs is usually limited to yellow spots on leaves. Heavy infestations can cause stunting and distortion of leaves or blossoms. In the home garden, spittlebugs can be a problem on strawberries where they can cause small or distorted fruit or even weaken or kill the entire plant.

There are several easy ways to control spittlebugs. A strong spray of water from the garden hose will knock them to the ground to become the next meal for an opportunistic bird. Plant flowers to attract lacewings and ladybugs, which are predators of the spittlebug. Another option is to hand pick the nymphs from their foamy habitat. Turn this job over to an inquisitive child – they get to earn some ice cream money while doing something fun, and you get rid of the spittlebugs.

References

National Audubon Society, *Field Guide to Insects & Spiders*. New York: Chanticleer Press, 1980.

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