



Caption: Dark winged fungus gnat
Photo by: Ken Gray

What Bugs Your Houseplants?

Where do houseplant pests come from and how do I get rid of them

by Carol Barany for Yakima Valley Master Gardeners

**For information
on the Yakima
county Master
Gardener
Program:**

[https://
extension.wsu.edu/
yakima/home-garden/](https://extension.wsu.edu/yakima/home-garden/)



It never fails to amaze me. In the deepest freeze of winter, if you leave just a few drops of red wine in a glass on the kitchen counter, fruit flies will somehow manage to find it. It's the same with bugs on my houseplants.

With three months to go before I move by houseplants outdoors for a summer on my shady porch, it happened. A film of sticky honeydew (AKA bug poop) on the windowsill below the shelves where I overwinter most of them triggered the alarm. A closer inspection confirmed my suspicions. Tiny black aphids were crawling all over the foliage of some of my favorite succulents. Perhaps this has happened to your plants, with mealy bugs,

spider mites, or scales joining the party.

These plants have been in the house since early November, and the last time I looked, they were healthy. Where did these critters come from? Biology 101 tells me that they didn't appear out of thin air, and that this batch of bugs had to come from pre-existing family members that somehow snuck into the house. Perhaps they hitched a ride in a pot I grabbed off the shelf that wasn't properly sanitized. Maybe there were eggs or larvae in the potting soil. Just because I didn't see any pests for months doesn't mean they weren't there.

Whether it's a few bacteria from a casserole you sampled at a potluck last night that wasn't refrigerated properly, or a few insects on a house plant, it all starts when a small number of pests set up camp in an environment they find hospitable. Once they've settled in and made themselves at home, (whether in your G.I. tract or on a echeveria), they start reproducing rapidly. Soon, there are too many to go unnoticed. The bugs were there for a while, but when their numbers were small, they were easy to overlook.

Here's a list of the usual suspects:

- Aphids are small, round, and juicy-looking. Often green, they come in many other colors. Aphids are found in masses crowded on the freshest plant growth.

- Scales are brownish, shell-like bumps less than 1/8 inch long on stems and leaves, capable of producing lots of sticky honeydew.

- Mealybugs, about 1/8 inch long covered with white waxy strands like tiny balls of sticky cotton, are usually found where a branch or leaf connects with the main stem.

•Spider mites are smaller than the period at the end of this sentence, and are often first noticed because of the fine webbing they make on the undersides of leaves.

With some effort, light or moderate infestations of houseplant pests can be managed, but until then, place the sick plants in quarantine until they are no longer contagious. Heavily infested plants may be too damaged to save. Get rid of them! You have my permission to pull the plug immediately, and buy yourself a nice, new, healthy plant. If this kind of “good-bye” is hard for you, you can always take a cutting and start all over again.

If you decide to perform first aid, these techniques may be effective:

- * Remove and discard heavily infested leaves and stems. Even healthy plants can use a good shearing this time of year.

- * Remaining aphids, mealy bugs, and scales may be crushed with your fingers, or wiped away with a cotton swab moistened in rubbing alcohol. Some plants could be damaged by the alcohol, so test it on a single leaf and watch the results for a few days.

- * Try blasting the bugs off with a jet of lukewarm water, paying particular attention to the leaves’ undersides. Wrap a plastic bag around the pot and soil to keep it from spilling out, and work in a shower or sink. On a warm day, you can do this outdoors. Repeat weekly, if necessary.

- * The next level of intervention is treating with an insecticidal soap, or other form of insecticide, that is registered for indoor use on houseplants. These products must be used with care, and according to label instructions. The pesticide label is a legal document that details what

plants, what insects, how much of the chemical, and the timing of applications that are correct for the product.

WSU Extension's Pestsense has fact sheets outlining cultural, mechanical, biological, and chemical controls of common insect pests on indoor plants.

Find it at: <http://pestsense.cahnrs.wsu.edu/Search/MainMenuWithFactSheet.aspx?CategoryId=15&ProblemId=834>

Local WSU Master Gardeners provide free advice and help with problems like this. If you have a plant or insect problem, a sample of the affected plant or the insect will help clinicians diagnose the problem accurately and make a management recommendation for you. Call them at 509-574-1604.