



Aphids



One of the biggest plant pests that becomes prevalent during the summer is actually a very small thing. Aphids are tiny insects, but they are prolific, reproducing either by live birth or laying eggs, depending on the season. These miniscule suckers come in a rainbow of colors – green, black, pink, grey, brown, yellow. While some of the adults have wings, others do not and hence cannot fly. These creatures can be anywhere from less than half a millimeter, about a fiftieth of an inch, to six and a half millimeters, about a quarter of an inch. Many of them are females, which means they can, and often do, reproduce without males. This process is called “parthenogenesis”.

There are over 4400 different species of aphids, and about 250 cause plant problems in several ways. The most obvious is that they insert their stylets, which are very much like hypodermic needles, into plant tissue, and suck out sap, which is full of essential nutrients. As you might imagine, this does not benefit the plant at all.

One clue to an aphid infestation is the unnatural, tacky sheen that often appears on leaves. This is caused by their sticky, sugary liquid called “honeydew”, the remains of the plant sap after the aphids have digested it. Honeydew can become infected with sooty mold, further interfering with the physiology of an already weakened plant.

Ants seek out honeydew to feed their young. Because they enjoy the sugary treat, they protect its source in several ways. Ants might stroke aphids to promote honeydew production, for instance, but that is not the only striking phenomenon. They safeguard them from predators, and even carry the aphid young from one place to another, either to provide them with more plant

material or to protect them from inclement weather. In places with cold winters, ants have been known to shelter aphid eggs in their own nests and bring them to a new plant in the spring.

If all those problems were not enough, aphids are the main agent for plant virus transmission.

With a big aphid infestation, leaves can curl up around the colony and not develop properly. This does not hurt the insect; it just serves as a shelter for the pest. Dealing with them requires a certain amount of tenacity. Insecticides rarely take care of the problem. There are so many of them, and they reproduce so quickly, they have become resistant to many pesticides. One good action is to hose down the plant with a strong stream of water, even sudsy water, and to repeat this daily for about a week. Even though some have wings, if you knock them off the plant with water, they rarely fly again.

Remember to examine flower buds as well as leaves, since aphids consider flower buds a wonderful delicacy.

Aphids have a number of natural enemies. The most familiar is the lady bug, which unfortunately does “fly away home.” Other insects, including green lacewings and praying mantis, will dine enthusiastically on aphids as well as other pests. Any of these are available online.

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