

Spittlebug

While it is not exactly a xerophyte, one of the delights of a desert landscape is the herb rosemary.



It is an herb, it is a shrub, and it has that deep green, narrow foliage, which complements so many other features that we in the garden. In its low-growing, sprawling form, it can even be described as a 'living mulch'. Here in the southwest, we

appreciate almost any living green thing, so dramatic additions like the dark color of rosemary can provide wonderful contrast to the severe browns we often rely on for our landscapes.

It does quite well with high temperatures, and even survives during periods of relatively cold temperatures. These extremes are really the norm here in the beautiful *challenging* Mojave Desert.

Gently touching it while walking nearby, releases its wonderful pungent aroma. Rosemary as an important culinary herb, useful in many dishes, but it has a number of useful qualities in addition to aesthetic ones.

Researchers are looking at rosemary's potential in pest management, specifically to repel insect pests. It makes sense to have this capacity, being so aromatic. The aroma makes it an important herb in cooking, but the plant is not interested in whether we like its smell or taste. The strong flavor or scent compounds play important roles in survival. For some plants, the scent helps attract pollinators, so they can reproduce. Rosemary appears to have created these chemicals for protection against predators and sometimes from disease causing microorganisms.

It survives our heat and cold, smells and tastes great, and has substances that defend it against many enemies. Still, despite its protective compounds, rosemary is **not** immune to all problems.

As days become longer and warmer, an annoying insect often shows up around rosemary foliage. This pest is called as "spittlebug", known in parts of the world as "cookoo spit". It should be apparent that it looks like spit, although one reference compared it to cappuccino

foam. It shows up in frothy patches, scattered through the plant, surrounding stems just under the leaves. The “spit” is produced by an insect’s nymph stage, creating a moist environment, protecting the insect from desiccation. It may taste bad to prospective predators.

There are different spittlebugs, with different host plants. As a result, information on spittlebug’s potential to do damage, or be controlled, is limited. Generally, spittlebugs seem to cause only a cosmetic problem, **unless** the infestation is very severe and allowed to persist. Then, plants may become wilted or yellow. Considering how robust rosemary is, that would probably happen only if the plant were already stressed from another cause, like poor drainage or nutrition.

Long before wilting and yellowing happen, a gardener wants to get this problem under control. The **first** step is to make sure the plant is healthy, growing in well-drained soil. Then avoid installing any plant with suspicious white patches. When spittlebugs first appear, they might be controlled simply by knocking them off the stems with a strong stream of water.

Early control is usually the most effective.

Dr. Angela O’Callaghan is the Social Horticulture Specialist for Clark County Cooperative Extension. Contact ocallaghana@unce.unr.edu or 702-257-5581.