



We had a taste of spring in January and low and behold, winter seems to be back for a bit. And at this time of the year, gardeners are getting antsy to get back into the soil. Well...we may have to practice some patience for a bit longer. One way to keep occupied, and keep those hands busy, is by getting those houseplants whipped into shape. You know you have been putting it off and it does the plants no good to continue to ignore them - especially if you have houseplants that move from indoors to outdoors and back again. During the late summer and early fall months, you may have missed a few insect problems when they were moved back inside – it is so easy to do. The insects are so little and we are so busy with fall cleanup, that they can escape unnoticed. And believe me they have loved you all winter for leaving them alone. When left untreated throughout fall and winter – those insect populations have been busy building to explosive numbers.

Where do these critters come from? First, we often, unknowingly, bring plant pests into our homes when we move those plants between indoor and outdoor environments. And second, at this time of the year we typically see an influx of flowering plants into the retail markets, merrily paving our way into spring. Whether it is potted bulbs, flowering plants or just beautiful greenery – all can potentially bring insect issues into our home environment. So even if you have been responsibly treating any existing issues, you may be bringing more in on new plant material. While most quality retailers would never sell you a plant that they know to be infested with any kind of a problem - they just sneak in sometimes. (I actually look for plants with problems – okay so I'm weird that way - but I do like to see which treatments work and which ones don't, and it is often very difficult for me to find problem laden plants in quality retail establishments.)

Before you even begin to think about a treatment of any kind - correctly identify the insect problem. You really can't effectively treat what you don't know and understand. If you are stumped with pest identification, take a sample to your favorite garden center, check the library (or a bookstore) for any houseplant pest books that they may have, or search online. Any controls, whether washing with water or a soap product, swabbing with alcohol, or applying insecticides - should be aimed at the most vulnerable time frame for each particular pest and control option. Most treatments and insecticides work best on the young stages of an insect's development – crawlers, nymphs, or larvae. If hand control is a chosen option – often it is easier to see and remove adult stage insects. But you do run the huge risk of waiting too long when controlling adults - new eggs

may be laid, giving you new populations that will need to be controlled. Can you see the never-ending cycle here? If using any insecticides, either organic or synthetic, be sure to read and follow all label instructions – to the letter, it's the law. Do not use any product that is not labeled for the particular insect you have identified on your particular plant. Make sure the formulation chosen is for indoor treatment. Never use too little or too much – each formulation is quite specific as to the amounts that must be used for maximum effectiveness. Let's take a look at some of the insects and what you can do about them. Armed with some information, you can get those houseplants looking fantastic – in no time at all.

Some of the common insects observed on houseplants are whiteflies, mealybugs, spider mites, scales, and sometimes aphids. Whiteflies are commonly found in greenhouse situations and are often brought into the home on purchased material. It is quite easy to figure out if you have them by gently tapping a leaf stem – if little white-winged things fly about – they are probably whiteflies. In the immature stage, they can be found on the back or underside of leaves – they look like a semi-translucent white smudge. Often placing sticky traps (yellow or blue sticky sheets that are available in most garden centers) in or near infested plants will help keep the adult population under control, but they don't do much for controlling the immature stage. Careful and multiple washings of the plant parts will help to rid the plant of the problem. If you choose to treat plants infested with these critters, use an appropriately labeled product for this particular pest. Often, multiple applications are needed to get all life cycles under control.

Mealybugs are small, soft-bodied, piercing insects that resemble a white mass of cotton. They generally congregate near stem joints, love new growth, and can often be found on the undersides of leaves. These pest infestations are easily washed off with lukewarm, soapy water or can be removed by gently rubbing with cotton balls moistened with regular household isopropyl alcohol. If the plant is heavily infested, you may have to resort to multiple insecticide treatments to get things under control.

Spider mites are a bit difficult to identify by sight as they are so very tiny. Most often spider mites are not noticed until the webbing declares their presence – and that doesn't generally happen until infestations are heavy. These pests can be difficult to treat as they generally show up when a plant is suffering from water or dry heat stress. Eliminating the insect does not mean that you have resolved the

conditions that caused a weakness in the plant which encouraged the insect population growth. More closely monitoring the water needs, and increasing the available humidity for the plant – either with a humidifier or a tray of stones with water in it, placed under but not touching the base of the plant pot - will help to balance out some of the stress. Washing or treating with an insecticidal soap will help to reduce the mite populations. Do be careful when working with plants that have mite problems – they are very tiny and will travel with you and your clothes to take up residence on other plants.

Scales are interesting critters. Most often they are found hanging about the central vein on the undersides of leaves and congregating on the stems. As adults, they look like light brown to blackish colored miniature turtle shells. They can be treated somewhat successfully as adults by using appropriately formulated horticulture oil that suffocates the insect through the somewhat hard shell covering. But, the most effective time to control is when they are in the crawler stage. When young they crawl about the plant looking for good places to drop their needle-like mouthparts, begin feeding, and mature in place. The result of this feeding, and the feeding of any of the insects that suck sap from plant parts, is a sticky residue called honeydew. Treatment of the insect will not eliminate the existing residue – washing with lukewarm soapy water will help to clean that up.

Aphids tend to be more of a problem in greenhouse situations than in home environments – but – they do show up and when they arrive, pay attention. Reproduction is rapid as they have a life cycle of only about a month, meaning exponential growth. They love citrus and new growth on lots of other plant material, some aphids need alternate plant hosts for summer and winter, while others like to live in root areas. Horticultural oils and insecticidal soaps do a pretty good job of control – but treat early as they can devastate a plant fairly quickly.

Lastly, and most importantly, a good preventative plant health maintenance routine will help to keep most health concerns to a minimum, and pest levels quite treatable. Keeping plants clean – yes – they too need a shower once in a while. Remove dust buildup with clean, soft cloths; repot when called for, divide and prune as befits a healthy plant regimen, and know when to call it quits. One of the best skills you can develop as a gardener is the knowledge of when enough is enough – it is okay to throw a plant out when the situation is hopeless.