KPOV – *The Point*

Gardening: Get Good at It

“Spider Mites”

May 21, 2019

Tiny and difficult to see with the naked eye, spider mites are members of the arachnid class of arthropods which includes spiders, scorpions and ticks. They’re among the most common pests in the garden. Unfortunately for Central Oregon gardeners, these mites thrive in dry, arid conditions, attacking a wide range of garden plants, vegetables, fruits, evergreens, shade trees and turfgrass. Left to thrive, they can frequently kill plants or cause serious stress to them.

There are various species, but the damage they do, their lifecycles and the best management practices are virtually the same. To determine if spider mites are present, look for leaf damage, webbing and the presence of eggs. Try shaking a branch or some leaves over a sheet of white paper. Disturbed, mites will scurry about, looking like tiny dark dots.

Spider mites cause injury as they feed. They suck sap from leaves and needles and leave them stippled or yellow. Following severe infestations, the plant can take on a gray or bronze look. Ultimately leaves might become scorched and drop prematurely.

Living in colonies of hundreds, mostly on undersurfaces of leaves, most spider mite species produce fine webbing which is often confused with that of true spiders. This webbing provides mites and their eggs some protection from natural enemies and environmental conditions.

Look for eggs near the veins of leaves. They are round and very large in proportion to the size of the mother. Old egg shells often remain and are another way to diagnose spider mite presence.

During the warmer months, these pests can develop rapidly, becoming full-grown in a week after hatching. Mature females often produce a dozen eggs daily for a few weeks, thus setting the stage for eight to ten overlapping generations thriving per year.

Spider mites survive winter protected in bark cracks or under debris. As winter approaches, most change color, often turning more red or orange – which is why they are sometimes called “red spiders.”

Lower humidity enables mites to digest food more efficiently. Further, drought-stressed plants often incur changes in their chemistry that actually make them more nutritious to spider mites. As if that weren’t enough in their favor, their natural predators need more humid conditions to thrive and are stressed by arid ones.

Preventing or controlling infestations is challenging. A first step is to make sure your plants receive adequate water to limit the effects of drought. Water-stressed plants are the most likely to be damaged. Periodically spraying the plants with a forceful jet of water can blast away and kill many mites and wash away dust that collects on leaves and hampers mite predators. Water blasts can also disrupt webbing and delay egg laying.

Be sure to remove and burn severely infested leaves. Avoid excessive nitrogen when fertilizing as this boosts mite health. You can also reduce mite numbers by getting rid of broadleaf weeds such as mallow, bindweed, white clover and knotweed.

There are a variety of predatory mites and arthropods, including lady beetles, minute pirate bugs and lacewing larvae, that feed on mites. While there are few homeowner-approved insecticides recommended, acephate and bifenthrin *might* be effective on spider mites. Unfortunately most insecticides can actually aggravate infestation problems by killing off the beneficial predators -- especially if they are applied during hot weather. Horticultural oils or insecticidal soaps are safer and generally more effective.

For more information on this or any other gardening topic, call the Master Gardeners at 541-548-6088 or go to our website [www.gocomga.com](http://www.gocomga.com) and click on the KPOV tab on the orange bar. This has been Gardening: Get Good at It on KPOV, The Point.

**Resources:**

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