

## **Are those landscape insects really pests?**

Diana Alfuth, Horticulture Educator  
UW-Extension

You don't have to go far into your yard in summer to find insects. They are just about everywhere. But just because you find an insect, doesn't mean you need to destroy it! Before you grab the can of insecticide and start spraying, think about the consequences and consider an IPM approach to managing pests in your landscape.

IPM stands for "integrated pest management." In a nutshell, IPM means looking at all sides of a pest situation and choosing a combination of cultural, physical, biological and chemical control methods. In other words, if you can control the pest or tolerate its presence without the use of chemicals, you should try that first.

There are about 7,000 insect species in Wisconsin, and very few of them are pests. If you find an insect on your landscape plant, the first step is to identify that insect. It is extremely important to know just what the insect is before you do any spraying or control. The insect may not be causing damage to your plant at all, and in fact, it might be there eating the insects that are causing damage to your plants! If you don't know what the insect is and you spray an insecticide you have handy, you could be wasting your money if that insecticide is not effective on that particular insect. At the same time, you add toxic chemicals to the environment, and kill beneficial insects that happen to be in the area.

Pest insects can be categorized into three groups. The first group, "generalist pests", are insects that feed on a wide range of plant species. Aphids, which feed on many different kinds of plants, are generalist pests.

The second group, "specialist pests" are pests that are specific only to a certain plant or type of plant. A spruce sawfly, which feeds only on spruce, is an example.

The third group is "opportunistic pests." These pests are not a problem until a good opportunity arises, such as a plant being stressed by something else, such as drought. The bronze birch borer, ash borer and two-lined chestnut borer are good examples here. These insects don't attack healthy plants, so planting the right plant in the right place and keeping them healthy goes a long way toward preventing problems by opportunistic pests.

Once you identify your insect, look at what damage, if any, it is causing. A couple of beetles on a tree munching away are probably doing minimal damage, damage that the tree can tolerate. Plants and insects have evolved together, and plants can tolerate a certain amount of leaf loss due to insects without being affected. Leave those few insects alone and the balance of nature will take care

of itself. Virtually every landscape plant will endure some feeding by insects during the season.

The best way to deal with severe insect problems is to prevent them in the first place! Choose plants best suited for the soil, moisture, and light conditions of your landscape. The healthier the plants, the better able to withstand pests they are. Plant a variety of plants to mimic nature and encourage natural pest control. Plants grouped in beds are typically more protected than individual plants set in the middle of the yard. Mulching planting beds keeps down weeds, which compete with your landscape plants, and keep temperature and moisture levels more even, which lowers stress to the plants.

Cleaning up the area each year and disposing of infected leaves and other plant debris helps remove the source of many pest problems, including fungi and overwintering insects.

Even if you do all you can to keep plants healthy and prevent pest outbreaks, sometimes conditions are just right and outbreaks occur. Most plants can withstand substantial insect or disease activity before the plant's health is damaged. The healthier the plant, the higher pest population it can handle.

If you have an insect feeding on a plant to the point of defoliation, and it's a very important plant in your landscape, some sort of treatment may be necessary. If you absolutely must use a pesticide, it's important to properly time the application to the stage of the insects' life that it is most susceptible. This allows you to use the least toxic pesticide and the least amount of it. For example, Colorado Potato Beetles can be controlled in their young larval stage with a natural insecticide, Bt. But when those larva become adults, Bt is not effective, so a much more toxic chemical pesticide will be necessary.

Also keep in mind that most insects have very short lives. They may feed for only 3-4 days. By the time you notice the damage and get to spraying, they might be ready to die or leave on their own! Spraying pesticides in this case is again a waste of time and money, and environmentally unsound.

If you do choose to use pesticides, read the label thoroughly, be sure the insect you are trying to control is listed, as well as the plant you are planning on spraying. Follow all safety precautions, and store any unused product properly.

Remember that insects are a part of nature, and we can co-exist with them. Very few of them bite us or damage our landscapes. Indiscriminant spraying upsets the balance of nature and will lead to more pest outbreaks and problems. If you do have a problem, know what you have! Only by identifying the pest and learning it's life cycle can you effectively keep it under control.