Sucking Pests

It's the prime time of year for the first wave of pests to come visiting. If you've got bad bugs on or around your roses, it's a good bet that they're "suckers," pests that feed by poking a hole in tissue and drawing out the plant fluid, or rasping (scraping away plant tissue) and sucking. These are the bad actors in the garden - not only do they cause direct damage to tender foliage and delicate blossoms, but as they suck out plant sap, many pump out a sweet, sticky substance called "honeydew" that collects on leaves and stems. That sugary substance attracts ants, and supports the growth of sooty mold, a black fungus, rendering it rather ugly and reducing photosynthesis. And to add insult to injury, the sucking insects sometimes transmit disease to roses in the process of feeding.

The most prevalent sucking pests in the rose garden this time of year are aphids, leafhoppers, spittlebugs and thrips. The young resemble adults upon hatching except they are smaller and without wings, and as they grow, they shed their skins (a good diagnostic sign). Symptoms of direct damage from sucking pests include spotting, stippling or bronzing of leaves, curled, puckered or malformed leaves and petals or leaf and stem distortion.

Aphids, spittlebugs and leafhoppers may look grotesque but are usually not too harmful to the plant unless in huge numbers. They're also the easiest to get rid of. There are loads of chemical products available to spray these little beasts into oblivion, but they're not necessary to either get rid of them or reduce their population to a tolerable level. Some suggestions for managing the "suckers" in your garden include:

- **Cultural methods** – provide plants with good growing conditions and proper cultural care, especially appropriate irrigation so they are more resistant to attack; vigorous plants usually outgrow damage. Remove and dispose of old, spent flowers and other garden debris. A major attractant to sucking pests is lush new growth so go light on chemical fertilizers high in nitrogen; use less soluble forms of nitrogen and apply it in small portions throughout the season rather than all at once.

- **Mechanical and physical methods** – many sucking pests are soft-bodied and a blast of water can knock them to the ground. If pest populations are localized on a few curled leaves or new shoots, prune the areas out and dispose of them. If you see ants (they protect the honeydew-producing pests from natural enemies), put a band of sticky material around the base of the plant to prevent the ants from getting up.

- **Biological methods** – many predators love to dine on soft-bodied sucking pests; provide habitats that encourage natural enemies like lady beetles, lacewings, soldier beetles and syrphid flies.

- **Chemical methods** – there are lots of products to choose from to control sucking insects, though most infestations don't warrant using a pesticide. Start your management approach with the least toxic chemicals.
  - A dormant spray with horticultural oil may help reduce pests from overwintering.
  - Insecticidal soaps utilize potassium salts of fatty acids as the active ingredient and most beneficial insects are not harmed by soap sprays.
  - Products that contain the active ingredient *Beauveria bassiana* Strain GHA, a naturally occurring fungus, are targeted to control of aphids and thrips, along with mealybugs and whiteflies.

Though many pesticides are labeled "Caution," do read the label before using to determine their effect on beneficial insects, bees, and other wildlife. It's not worth knocking out lots of good guys just to get rid of some of the sucking nuisances in the garden.

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