



Mealybugs on Houseplants

Family: Pseudococcidae



Citrus Mealybug.

Photo from www.forestryimages.org
United States National Collection of Scale Insects
Photographs Archive, USDA ARS.

Injury

Several species of mealybugs are common pests of houseplants. The mealybugs are soft-bodied insects, whitish in color, and when mature about 5 mm (3/16th inch) in length. They move slowly, but can spread readily from plant to plant, especially when plant foliage touches. They feed by inserting long tube-like mouthparts into plant tissue and sucking juices from the host. As a result, plants may be stunted, or even killed, and there may be a sweet sticky substance called honeydew on the foliage or below the plant.

Description and Life History

Mealybugs are elongate-oval in shape, and often are whitish due to a waxy covering on the body. There may be two or more long waxy filaments extending from the posterior end of the body. Adults are usually found at rest or slowly crawling on the undersides of leaves or on stems. Mature females deposit eggs in a loose cottony wax, which may be conspicuous on the stems and undersides of leaves. As many as 600 eggs may be deposited in a mass, so the potential for population increase is great. The newly hatched young (called crawlers) crawl from the cottony masses and move around on the plant looking for a suitable site to feed. The crawlers are very small and may be easily blown from one plant to another by wind or breeze.

Young nymphs are yellow to pink in color, but after feeding begins, they exude white waxy material which soon covers the body. This waxy material protects the mealybugs from insecticidal sprays and from moisture or drying.

Management

Despite their delicate appearance, mealybugs may be difficult to control. One reason is the microhabitat they live in, e.g. the undersides of leaves, crotches of branches, or under protective sheaths found at the base of some plants. In addition, the waxy cottony masses protect eggs, and the waxy covering protects the young and adults. The newly emerged crawlers are the most susceptible stage to control because they do not have the waxy

coating. Unfortunately, in the home or greenhouse environment, crawlers may occur at many times during the year, and there may be repeated generations of these insects.

For a small number of plants, hand picking, washing, or using a cotton swab dipped in rubbing alcohol to remove individual mealybugs can give good control. Washing with soapy water solution (two teaspoons of a mild *dish detergent*, not soap, per gallon of water) using a soft brush or cloth, will help to dislodge the mealybugs.

Discarding heavily infested plants may be the best recommendation for those plants and for others around them. If you are not sure, isolate nearby plants for a few months until it can be determined whether they also have mealybugs or not. You may also want to isolate plants after treatment to avoid reinfestation

There are also houseplant insecticide products available to treat mealybugs on plants. Be sure that the plant you want to treat, and “mealybugs,” are listed on the label. Check the label to see if the product is safe for use indoors, or move the plant outside for treatment. Some plants are very sensitive to chemical sprays, and on these plants a lower rate of application is usually given on the label. Sensitive plants include Boston Ivy, Maidenhair and Pteris ferns, some species of Crassula, African violets, Gloxinia, Orchids and Begonias. If you do choose to treat a plant, you need to apply it so thorough coverage of the plant is achieved. Applications may have to be repeated (see label directions) if mealybugs reappear. This may occur because some of the mealybugs may be well hidden and may not come in contact with the insecticide, or because the mealybugs may have been in a non-susceptible stage (e.g. eggs) when the application was made

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