

Indoor Herb Gardening

Pests Management Strategies

Introduction

Herbs are generally easy plants to care for as long as they are given the conditions they require. However, at times, you may see one or more of the following most commonly spotted pests on your herb plants.

Aphids (*Aphis spp.*)



Courtesy of www.thespruce.com

Aphids are sucking pests about 1/8" long. They may be various colors and are most typically found on young, tender growth or under leaves. Sticky leaves and/or stems, the result of aphid secretions (honeydew), are often the first sign you may notice. Primary damage is often leaf curl, while secondary damage may come from a black fungus that grows on the sticky secretions.

Mealy Bugs (Various genera)



Courtesy of Missouri Botanical Garden

Mealy bugs are about 1/5 to 1/3 inch long and have a white, cottony appearance. They are sucking insect typically found in clusters on the undersides of leaves along the veins or in the nodes. Like aphids, they secrete a sticky substance that can promote growth of a sooty, black mold. Infested plants may weaken, wilt, turn yellow, and eventually die.

White Flies (Various genera)

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Courtesy of www.planetnatural.com

Whiteflies are very small sucking insects, only about 1/16 to 1/10 inch in length. They tend to cluster on the undersides of leaves. You may see a tell-tale white cloud of them fly up with a heavily infested plant, if they are disturbed. Whiteflies feed during all life stages. If left unchecked, they may cause stunted growth, mottling, yellowing, wilting, defoliation, and ultimately death. They also secrete a sticky honeydew that may foster growth of a sooty mold that is unsightly but not particularly damaging.

Scale (Various genera)



Courtesy of www.wikipedia.org

Scales are another variety of sucking insect that may weaken plants. Adults may be seen on leaves, petioles, and stems. Scale insects are often overlooked, so the first signs you may see are yellowing or wilting leaves. Like aphids, mealy bugs, and whiteflies, they also secrete a sticky honeydew that promotes growth of a sooty mold. They are easiest to control at the larval (crawler) stage because, as adults, they lose their legs, settle into their feeding behavior and develop a protective shell.

Spider Mites (*Tetranychus spp.*)



Courtesy of Missouri Botanical Garden

This is the only common pest that is not a true insect, but a mite that feeds on the plant's sap. They are tiny at only about 1/50 inch, so they are very difficult to see. The first symptom may be a decline in the plant's health. You may notice a dull appearance of the leaves, stippling, or wilting. You may try to tap a

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branch/stem over a piece of white paper. If spider mites are present. You may see small specks that look like pepper.

Fungus Gnats (Order *Diptera*)



Courtesy of University of Minnesota Extension
Adult fungus gnats are very small (about 1/16 to 1/8 inch) that infest the soil to feed on rotting organic matter and lay their eggs. They are mostly a nuisance. Damage to plants is done primarily by the larvae that hatch in the soil and feed on plant roots when their soil-based food sources run out.

Pest Management Strategies

Since you will most likely be eating the herbs you grow, chemical strategies are a last resort. Before turning to chemicals, there are some good preventative and mitigation measures you may take.

1. **Start with healthy plants.** Inspect plants carefully before you bring them into your home from a retail outlet or the garden. You may also consider quarantining them from your other plants, if you have the space to see whether pest problems develop.
2. **Give your herbs the conditions they need to thrive.** This is the best preventative strategy. Healthy plants are better able to fight off pest damage. Maintaining good sanitation is also important, particularly to mitigate fungus gnats.
3. **Inspect your herbs regularly.** Even healthy herbs may succumb to a pest or two. You will most often be able to save your herbs, if you catch the problem early.
4. **Physically remove any pests.** This can be as simple as scraping them off or using a gentle spray in the sink or shower. Sticky traps may also help with white flies and fungus gnats.
5. **Prune affected parts of the plant.** Light infestations confined to small areas may be pruned out and discarded.
6. **Use horticultural oil or insecticidal soap.** This would be a treatment of last resort if you plan to eat your herbs. Otherwise, these treatments may be effective if you are growing them for ornamental purposes.
7. **Discard the plant.** In extreme infestations, disposing of the plant may be your only option.

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Resources used in preparing this handout

Missouri Botanic Garden:

<http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/gardens-gardening/your-garden/help-for-the-home-gardener/advice-tips-resources/visual-guides/herb-problems-indoors.aspx>

Planet Natural Research Center:

<https://www.planetnatural.com/pest-problem-solver/houseplant-pests/>

Gardening Know How:

<https://www.gardeningknowhow.com/edible/herbs/hgen/herb-growing-problems.htm>

University of California Horticulture and Natural Resources Integrated Pest Management Program:
<http://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7401.html>

University of Missouri Extension: *Growing Herbs at Home* (<https://extension2.missouri.edu/g6470>)

University of Illinois Extension: *Gardening with Herbs*
(<http://extension.illinois.edu/herbs/intro.cfm>)