It is true. Houseplants can get bugs, too. Although they are more protected from insects than your landscape plants, they’re still vulnerable to attack. Those pesky pests somehow find their way into your home and attach themselves to your plants. Chemicals may be your first source for defense; however, there is a number of other less abrasive solutions to the problem that you may want to try first.

While commercial pesticides are essential for controlling severe infestations, many insect problems on houseplants can be reduced with regular inspections and proper care. Most houseplant pests can be eliminated before they reach high, destructive population levels when you follow a few basic steps.

Indoor plant pest control begins when you first bring home a new plant. Before bringing the plant inside, inspect it thoroughly for bugs. It is recommended that the new plant be isolated from other plants for about one-month. This gives insect eggs and larva that may have been inconspicuous during your inspection, to develop and be recognized by you. The problem can then be corrected before the pests spread to other plants.

There are a number of non-chemical methods to use if a pest problem evolves. If the insects are large, like caterpillars or snails, the easiest way to control them is to pick them off the plant and dispose of them. Smaller insects, such as aphids, mealybugs, and whiteflies, need a little more effort in order to eradicate them.

By spraying plants with a forceful stream of room temperature water, the smaller insects can be removed. This can be done outside with a hose or in a laundry sink. Spraying the plants every two weeks can also prevent pest problems by not allowing them to become established. This procedure also keeps plants dust-free, with a healthy appearance.

Using a mild soap solution to wash the plants is another way to control insects. Mix two tablespoons of liquid soap in a gallon of water and gently wash the bugs off the leaves of the plants with a soft cloth or sponge. It is important to use a very mild soap that does not contain anti-bacteria or degreaser ingredients. These components can damage the leaves of your plants.

For a light infestation of aphids or mealybugs, you can also use a cotton ball dipped in rubbing alcohol to eliminate them. Lightly brush the bottom of the leaves where the insects are found. Be careful not to over apply or use too much rubbing alcohol on the swab, as this may burn the foliage.

All of these pest control methods can effectively control houseplant pest problems. They are easy to use and less expensive than chemical control. If utilized before insect populations become too large, you probably will not have to use chemicals. However, in cases of severe infestations, chemical insecticides may be necessary.

The simplest course of action to do during heavy infestations is to purchase a ready-to-use, multi-purpose spray. There are several mixtures available that are for a wide range of common houseplant pests. It is important to make sure that the insecticide you choose be labeled for the plant you want to use it on and the insect you want to control. Some plants may not be able to tolerate all the ingredients in certain insecticides. Although chemicals may be necessary at times to control houseplant pests, it should be your last source of defense.

Remember monitoring for insects, paying attention to your plants, is the best pest control method you can use. This will allow you to combat any problems before they become too large to eliminate without chemicals. Also, remember to read the labels of all pesticides and follow directions precisely. More is not better when dealing with pesticides.
For more information on houseplant pest control or other plant questions please call the Osceola Master Gardeners’ Plant Clinic at (321) 697-3000 on Monday to Friday from 10am to 2pm.

Interested in reducing time and money in your landscape? The "Florida Landscape" class teaches you to use efficient and effective practices that will create a beautiful landscape with minimal effort. The next class will be held at the Ag Center on November 27th. Please call (321) 697-3000 for more information and to register.

Want to learn more about gardening and become a garden volunteer for your community? Master Gardener classes will begin in January. Please call (321) 697-3000 for more details.

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