HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

VEGETABLE PESTS

As the warmer weather approaches, the tender loving care that you've given to your vegetable garden will be put to a test. This is because of the significant increase in pesky insects that accompanies the warm weather. Insects can cause serious problems for plants during these warm months, as they thrive on the heat and humidity, and without proper monitoring and control, they can destroy all the hard work you’ve put into your vegetable garden.

Before too long, your gardening efforts will repay you with scrumptious vegetables. That is, if you can beat the pests to your fresh produce. What a shame it is to go out to your garden for a fresh tomato to top off your salad and find out that a small insect, which you can hardly see, has eaten your crop. There are several insects to watch out for during the next few months. They arrive in force to feed on the leaves, stems, roots and vegetables of your plants. The most common pests that attack your vegetable plants include leaf miners, armyworms, spider mites and aphids.

Leaf miners seem to cause the most damage to tomato and cucumber plants. They are called leaf miners because they burrow between the two tissue layers of the leaf as they feed, leaving tunnel-like pathways through the leaf surface. Leaf miners are difficult to control as the leaf layers protect them from chemicals. The best defense against these critters is to monitor your plants and remove and dispose of damaged leaves as you see them.

Armyworms will attack a variety of plants. They are "chewing" insects. This means that they consume the leaves of the plants, leaving holes, chewed margins or nothing of the leaves. Armyworms eat during the daylight, so the best line of defense is to pluck them off one by one and dispose of them while they are eating. You can also use an insecticidal dust to rid yourself of this pest.

Spider mites are not really insects. In fact, as their name suggests, they are closely related to spiders. They have eight legs and form webs to travel from leaf to leaf. These pests are tiny, usually no more than a 50th of an inch long. They congregate on the underside of leaves, so you may have to look hard for them. Spider mites are "sucking" insects. This means that they feed by piercing the leaves with their needle-like mouthparts and suck out the plant juices. The leaves of the plants will become stippled, dry or fall off. Since spider mites are small, you may not notice them until they start to damage your plants. An insecticidal soap will control spider mites. Just make sure to spray underneath the leaves where the insects live.

Aphids are also "sucking" insects that collect on the underside of the leaves. Damage from aphids will appear as yellow splotches on the surface of the leaves. The leaves will also curl.
Aphids excrete a sticky substance called honeydew. Sooty mold, a black fungus, will grow on the leaves where the honeydew falls. An insecticidal soap will control aphids

As with all garden pesticides, make sure to thoroughly read the label and apply as directed. More is not always better when applying pesticides. Too much may harm your plants, as well as the insects. Also, make sure that crop you want to use is on the label listing. This is especially important when using pesticides on vegetables because you are growing things that you are going to eat. Furthermore, always wash your vegetables with soap and water before consumption.

To reduce the damage caused by insects, monitor your garden on a regular basis. Examine plants and look for signs of damage. It is much easier to control the insects when they first arrive in your garden than after they are established. It's sad but true that sometimes, no matter how much we work to make the insects feel unwelcome, they will still visit the garden and harm our harvest.

For more information on vegetable gardening and answers to other gardening questions, call the Osceola County Master Gardeners at (321) 697-3000. They are available to take your calls Mondays to Fridays from 10 am to 2 pm.

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Date: April 6, 2008