Insect Pests

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Mild temperatures and generous moisture has contributed to excellent plant growth and yield. There are several insects taking advantage of the lush foliage and fruit.

Cabbage loopers are small green caterpillars that feed on the cole crops such as broccoli, cabbage, Brussels sprouts, and other greens. Even though the bodies are small (. 2 inch to .8 inch) their appetites are large. If they are left uncontrolled on winter vegetables the yield will be delayed and greatly reduced. A daily visit to the garden and search for initial damage is an essential part of control. Look for pieces with chewed edges missing from the foliage. The damage can be at the leaf edge or within the leaf.

The best treatment for looper feeding is to spray a Bt product such as Dipel, Thuricide, BioWorm Control, or Monterrey Bt on the leaves where the worms are feeding. Bt is a bacterial derivative that must be consumed by the caterpillar to kill it. That mode of action is both limiting and positive. It means that the material must be sprayed under the leaves if that where the loopers are feeding, but it also means that the killing action can be controlled. Contact on non-feeding insects or even caterpillars will not hurt them. Bt killing impact is further limited because it only is activated by the alkaline stomach chemistry of caterpillars. Pets or people can consume it without any effect.

To increase the effectiveness of a Bt spray incorporate 2 teaspoons of dish detergent in the mix to serve as a spreader. Use a fine spray so that the mist reaches all surfaces. Bt is available as a dust in some formulations. It can work in that form but I find it hard to dust the underside of the leaf.

There is a second caterpillar that is active in the fall vegetable garden. Cut worms operate in the soil to cut and feed on the stems of seedlings. A high germination rate of turnip, lettuce, radish or other seedlings may be wiped out by cutworms. Gardeners notice the disappearance of the seedlings and then when they look closely at the soil in the area will find the dark colored cutworm caterpillar curled up near the row. They are plump and vary from dime to nickel size in their curled state.

Some cutworms will feed on growing seedlings at night so some control is accomplished by spraying the seedlings with Bt but the most effective treatment is to spray Sevin on the soil along the row at planting or just before germination.

If your early fall tomatoes or peppers are discolored and lumpy, it is likely that one of the stink bug related insects is feeding on the fruit. Stink bugs have the look of an armored Humvee with angular shaped bodies. The leaf-footed bug has sail like structures on its legs. All of the stink bugs can fly and they feed on fruit by injecting their digestive juices into the flesh and then extract the resultant “stew” of partially digested pulp. The action leaves scar tissue complete with discoloration of the skin. The fruit can still be eaten but is not as appetizing as an unmolested fruit.

Adult stink bugs are difficult to control. Sevin has worked best for me. There may be several size-stages of the stink bug on your plants. The young small- bodied stink bugs are easier to eliminate. Follow label instructions on whichever insecticide that you use, organic or manufactured.