

Insects in the Landscape

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With the rains last week, the fire ant colonies hidden in the soil have become visible mounds as the fire ants remodel their tunnels to deal with the moisture. Fire ants are a problem because they bite gardeners, the members of the gardener's family and their pets. In addition to the mounds in the landscape and garden, fire ants readily inhabit containers with plants.

An effective way to control fire ants is to combine application of a bait like Amdro with an acephate based mound application such as Surrender. The bait is applied over a wide area and the granules are picked up by the roving ants and carried back to the mounds in the area where it kills the inhabitants. It is an effective but relatively slow process (two weeks).

For mounds in the middle of your activities the treatment is applied to the mound and within hours the resident ants are killed or moving on to create a new mound.

The label does not allow the use of acephate based products for mounds in the vegetable garden but there are several products that use spinosad as the active ingredient that are labeled for use in the garden and are effective.

For containers use the product that is appropriate based on the plants that are grown in the container. Acephate based products can be used for containers that are being used for growing ornamentals. The Spinosad products can be used for both food crop and ornamental planted containers.

The rains and mild weather also kicked many of our ornamental plants into a growth mode. With the new plant growth, the aphids have shown up. Aphids suck the juices from plants, mostly new growth. As visible as the aphids are on plants such as hibiscus, milkweed, and greens, they don't usually cause much damage. Any insecticide will kill them, but it is usually best just to spray them off with a water stream. They will be back because they are very proficient at reproduction but eventually the predatory insects such as lady bugs and lace bugs will get them under control if you just use the water spray. Insecticides do a better job of controlling lady bugs than they do aphids the water spray allows the predatory insects to expand their populations.

With all the interest in Monarch butterflies many gardeners are planting milkweed. In addition to providing nectar and foliage for the butterflies and their caterpillars, the milkweed almost always hosts a showy population of brightly colored aphids. If you must reduce the aphid population on your milkweed just slide your fingers down the stem. The aphids don't spread to other plants and don't hurt the milkweed. Remember the primary reason for the milkweed to be in your garden is for it to serve the needs of the butterflies. A healthy population of golden aphids doesn't interfere in the milkweeds function to serve the butterflies. I have even heard gardeners relate that a healthy population of aphids on milkweeds new from the nursery verifies that the plants do not have lingering or systematic pesticides from the production period.

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension entomologist Mollie Keck reminds us that if our cabbage, Brussels sprouts, spinach and other cool weather vegetables are infested with aphids it is an indication that the

plants are past their prime and rather than be sprayed, they should be pulled from the garden to make room for the hot weather veggies.

Among the predatory insects that feed on aphids are several types of wasps. They will sometimes sting gardeners if you blunder into a nest or individual, and they can be a threat if the nest is near a door or area with lots of activity. To deal with those threats effective wasp and hornet sprays are available that produce a 20 ft spray that instantly kills the wasps in and around a nest. Minimize the use of the insecticides to nests that are a direct threat. Encourage wasps in general to help you control insects like aphids. They are also important in controlling webworms and the caterpillars that will be feeding in the oak trees this spring.