



APHIDS

Aphids are the tiniest of pests. Hardly visible because of their size, aphids are about 1/10 of an inch long with a soft pear-shaped body, long antennae, and two tube-like projections from the rear of the abdomen. Some types of aphids have wings, but nymphs are wingless. They come in a variety of colors and affect many different plants. Although aphids seldom kill plants directly, they often result in stunted growth and minimal harvest.

Aphids suck juice from the leaves, fruit, and stems of plants. This results in leaves curling, puckering, and turning yellow. Some aphid species are also known to transfer viruses or inject toxins into plants while feeding. Besides observing the actual insect, another sign of aphid feeding is a clear, sticky substance that is visible on the leaves of plants. This substance is referred to as “honeydew,” the excess plant sap aphids ingest and cannot utilize. Honeydew facilitates the growing of black, sooty mold which disfigures plants and blocks photosynthesis. Also, ants are attracted to the honeydew secreted by aphids and are often co-present.

Good news regarding aphid management is that aphids have many natural predators including birds, ladybugs, and lacewings. However, if natural predators don’t adequately take care of your aphid problem, you may take direct action by hand-squishing or spraying plants vigorously with water every other day in the early morning for about a week. This knocks the aphids off the plants. A more drastic option for heavy infestations is to spray plants with insecticidal soap to control population proliferation.



Clockwise from top: aphids on a Phragmites leaf, ants attending to aphids on the underside of a milkweed leaf. Photo credit: Jenn Forman Orth.

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Garden Insects of North America: The Ultimate Guide to Backyard Bugs | Whitney Crenshaw

The Organic Gardener’s Handbook of Natural Pest and Disease Control | Jeff Ball