

SPIDER MITES ARE BIG PROBLEM FOR HOMEOWNERS

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What can cause our plants to turn brown besides hot, dry weather? This time of year the lawns and ornamentals start turning brown and looking un-healthy, now homeowners are faced with an outbreak of spider mites. Spider mites are in town and really enjoying this hot dry weather. Hot dry weather is associated with spider mite outbreaks because the mites feed more in hot weather. This accelerates their development and egg production. Dry conditions also may inhibit the effectiveness of the spider mite's natural enemies, and water-stressed plants do not tolerate mite feeding injury well.

Spider mites injure plants by sucking the juices from the leaves or needles with their piercing mouthparts. They usually feed on the underside of the leaves, out of direct sunlight. The area that surrounds the feeding site often is lightly flecked, which gives the plant a speckled appearance, or just a browning of the needles or leaves. Sometimes people first think the tree is lacking in water. During heavy infestations, the whole plant becomes discolored. Mite damage often is associated with the premature drop of infested leaves and needles.

Spider mites are particularly hard on junipers and spruce trees, but they also feed on a variety of other trees, shrubs, flowers, vegetables and lawn grasses. The way I check for spider mites is to hold a piece of white paper under the leave and shake the branch on the paper, if the specks on the paper move or smear when you rub your finger across the paper you have spider mites.

A wide variety of organisms feed on spider mites and often provide a high degree of natural control. One reason for spider mite outbreaks in yards and gardens is the use of insecticides that destroy the mite's predators. Carbaryl (Sevin) devastates natural controls. Although Malathion sometimes is listed as a miticide, it largely is ineffective in spider mite control, and it destroys many mite predators, which can aggravate mite problems.

I recommend that homeowners adequately water plants during dry conditions to limit the importance of drought stress on spider mite outbreaks. Hose plants with a jet of water to remove and kill mites and to remove the dust that collects on foliage, which interferes with mite predators. However, remember watering deep is the best way to water perennials.

If chemical control is necessary, gardeners should use such pesticides specifically developed for spider mite control such as (Kelthane, Red Spider Spray), TetraSan, Hexygon, Onyx, Talstar, insecticidal soaps, sulfur or (Orthene). Sulfur may injure plants if it is used when temperatures reach 85 degrees Fahrenheit or higher, and it is always better to spray early or late in the evening to avoid leaf damage due to the hot sun. Regardless of the pesticide, mite control is difficult. The systemic insecticides such as the Orthene are absorbed by the tree and carried thru out the plant, these come in liquid sprays or in spikes you can put in the ground. There are also some companies that carry natural predators for mites which you can order. Much like ordering lady bird beetles to control aphids. The problem with these natural controls, is the time difference between when you release these bugs and when you get control. If you wait until you see symptoms then this may not be an effective control.

One final point with evergreens is do not over water the young trees. Over watering will show the same signs as drought. However we need to make sure we are deep watering the mature trees. Keep a close watch for these little bugs.

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