

Mealybugs

Description

Mealybugs belong to the scale insect group. Their name comes from the whitish “mealy” wax covering their soft bodies. This wax helps them retain water, and it helps you to quickly identify them. The females are oval and about $\frac{1}{16}$ " long. The females are the main pests, as the males are small gnat-like insects that live for only a short time.

Mealybugs have sucking mouth parts. They feed by inserting straw-like projections, called stylets, into plant tissue. This, of course, is detrimental to the plant as some of its main nutritional stores are being robbed.

Location

A warm, humid and sheltered area is a haven for these pests. This makes greenhouses very inviting, but they can also infest your houseplants. Plants such as begonias, camellias, and orchids are special treats for this bug, but they are not picky.

If you are inspecting your plant, you may not even notice these creatures. Look for small, white patches on wilting plants. These are areas where your plant is host to hundreds of eggs and mealybugs that are sucking it dry. It doesn't take long for these bugs to kill a fragile plant, so you need to be on the lookout for outbreaks.

Damage

Mealybugs do not cause significant plant injury in low numbers, but rarely do they stay small. A small problem quickly escalates into a full-blown infestation.

Your plant will show signs of the leaves' yellowing, curling and dropping—or

any combination of these. It will also be wilting and have an overall sickly appearance.

The honeydew produced by mealybugs also presents a problem. It encourages the growth of damaging molds and can cause fungal diseases, which break down a plant further.

Control

Do not despair. Although these bugs are annoying and destructive, they can be dealt with.

Manage crops. Inspect all of your recently purchased plants by checking under leaves and in leaf folds. Clean and inspect pots thoroughly for egg masses and crawlers, which are mealybug larvae.

Use biologicals. The mealybug destroyer, the ladybeetle (*Cryptolaemus montrouzieri*), is one of the most popular beneficial insects in the industry. This well-behaved beetle feeds on all stages of mealybugs as well as the honeydew they excrete.

Use chemical control. When all else fails, insecticidal soap will kill mealybugs, or a more convenient product is dish soap. Dilute 5 ml of soap into one litre of water. Test a small area before applying. This should rid your plant of mealybugs.

Mealybugs can be a serious problem, but don't start throwing out infested plants. These pests can be controlled and eliminated with a little effort and maintenance.

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