Pest Control—The Environmentally Responsible and Lazy Option!

Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: If a plant has too many pest problems, switch to another easier-to-grow plant. There are many choices.

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One of the principles of having a Florida Friendly yard is managing yard pests responsibly. Keeping our plants healthy is the best defense against pests. But even healthy plants can have pests from time to time. So let me give you a different way of thinking about pests.

Our gardens and landscapes need whiteflies—and aphids, scale, grasshoppers, mealybugs and the rest. They really do.

I know—right about now you’re thinking, okay, I’ll send you mine. But you see, whiteflies are not pests—neither are aphids, scale, grasshoppers, mealybugs, etc., unless they occur in overwhelming numbers in your landscape (or more likely on certain plants in your landscape). Whiteflies and the rest are not pests—they are food for beneficial insects in a healthy, well-balanced landscape.

Ninety-eight percent of the world’s insects are beneficial, and many of them are in your landscape munching away on pests (oops—I mean food). That is, they are until you get out the pesticide and start blasting away. Even if you do not hit a single beneficial, guess what happens when you kill off all their food. That’s right—if you want ladybugs in your garden, you need to have some whiteflies or aphids on hand. So when you see a little black sooty mold on the foliage of your favorite plant, just say, ‘Oh good, there’s some food over there for my beneficials.’
However, there are times when a plant will become so overwhelmed with pests that you have to take some action. Usually my first choice is to replace it with a more trouble-free plant; but if it’s a plant you especially love, there are treatment options that will not harm your beneficial population or the environment. Bring a sample of the problem (more than just one leaf if possible, please) to your local nursery or to the Leon County Extension office and ask, ‘What is the safest product I can use?’ There’s no need to go straight for the hard stuff if insecticidal soap, horticultural oil, or _Bacillus thuringiensis_ will do the trick.

We all benefit when homeowners opt for environmentally responsible solutions and fortunately, more people are becoming aware every day of the importance of doing so. But if using one of these safer pesticides doesn’t float your boat . . . if making the environmentally sound choice doesn’t give you a warm, fuzzy feeling, then do it just because it’s cheaper and easier. Consider these two homeowners:

Joe sees a hole in the foliage of his favorite plant. He cuts off a piece; jumps in his car; drives to the local nursery; finds a horticulturist; asks, ‘How can I kill these bugs that are eating my plant?!’; buys a product; drives back home and sprays, sprays, sprays. He spent time, money and gas and his yard probably doesn’t smell very good after all that spraying.

Across the street his neighbor, Gus, sees a hole in the foliage of his favorite plant. ‘Oh good, there’s some food over there for my beneficials.’ He goes inside, pours a glass of his favorite beverage, picks up a book, wanders back outside and plops into a lawn chair. ‘Mmmmm, the flowers sure smell great this evening!’

Pests (food) are being dealt with in both landscapes. So sit down and relax, and let your beneficials do the job for you. Cheers.