

# Controlling Houseplant Insects

## Lancaster County

444 Cherrycreek Road, Suite A / Lincoln, NE 68528  
(402) 441-7180 / <http://lancaster.unl.edu>

Reprinted from *The Nebline*, February 2004

[316]

Several species of scale insects, mealybugs and whiteflies are commonly found on plants in the home. All are sap-feeding insects that can weaken plants and cause poor, stunted growth. Death of infested plants occurs only in severe cases.

Houseplant insects may create an annoyance caused by large quantities of a sweet, sticky liquid waste product called honeydew that is excreted as the insects feed. Honeydew can make a sticky, shiny mess on the plant and nearby furniture and floors.

Scale insects have a tan to brown shell-like covering or scale that pro-



**Mealybugs**

Clemson University - USDA Cooperative Extension Slide Series. Image\_1435063. [www.insectimages.org](http://www.insectimages.org)

plant insect control. Success will depend upon thoroughness and persistence. Insecticide sprays made just for houseplants are available at garden centers. Formulated active ingredients such as insecticidal soaps and pyrethrin are available. Insecticides must be applied thoroughly, repeatedly and persistently, weekly for a month or more, to get good control.

Granular insecticides you add to the soil of infested houseplants seem to have very limited effectiveness and their use is discouraged because of toxicity concerns. On those plants that regrow after pruning, removing the heavily infested stems and treating the remainder is a possibility. Finally, unless the plant is particularly valuable, many people find it best to throw away infested plants before the pests spread to other houseplants. (MJF)

protects the insect's body. Scales may be from one-sixteenth to one-fourth inch in diameter and are usually found on the stems and/or leaves. Some scales are hemispherical in shape, while others are oval and flat. Mealybugs appear as white tangles of cotton on the leaves or stems. A common location is the slim, protective gap at the junctions of stems and leaves. White flies are tiny white insects that feed and lay their eggs on the underside of plant leaves. When an infested plant is disturbed, the tiny insects take flight and then return to the host plant.

Houseplant insects are difficult to control. There is no easy, simple, one-shot cure. One possibility is to pick off individual scales and mealybugs or gently rub the insects loose from the leaves and stems. This is a laborious task that works only on small, large-leaved plants. Dabbing each insect with an alcohol-soaked cotton swab is another possibility on lightly infested plants.

Sprays can be used for house-



**Scale insects**

William M. Ciesla, Forest Health Management International. Image\_3943014. [www.insectimages.org](http://www.insectimages.org)



**White flies**

Vicki Jedlicka, UNL Extension Assistant