



Friday's Feature

By

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Lace bugs cause unsightly problems for azaleas

Since its introduction from Japan in the 1920's, the azalea lace bug has become one of the most serious insect pests of azaleas. Although this insect prefers evergreen azalea varieties, it will also attack deciduous azaleas as well as mountain laurel.

Lace bugs are small insects, approximately 1/8 inch long. They have lacy wings that are partially transparent. Due to their size and color, these insects can be difficult to see on the plant. To help you find them, shake an infested branch over a white sheet of paper. The insects will fall off and are much easier to see and identify.

Lace bugs damage plants by inserting their piercing-sucking mouthparts into the underside of leaves and sucking out chlorophyll and other plant fluids.

The damage appears as spotted discoloration or bleaching of the upper surfaces of the leaves. Lightly infested leaves have a white-dotted, speckled or stippled appearance. In severe infestations, the leaves become almost white, many of them drying completely and dropping off.

The undersides of the leaves also exhibit signs of infestation. The surface can become rust colored and are frequently covered with dark spots of tar-like excrement.

The egg is the usual overwintering stage, although in mild winters adults survive to lay eggs the following spring. Egg hatching generally begins in late February, producing dense populations March through May. Lace bugs can complete three to five generations in a single season. Azaleas begin to look unhealthy as insect numbers increase through the spring and summer.

The first step to minimizing damage is to keep your azaleas healthy. Azaleas, which are normally understory shrubs, are less able to tolerate lace bug damage when planted in full sun and suffering from drought-stress.



The adult lace bug is very small, about 1/8 of an inch long with partially transparent wings.



Several stages of the lace bug can be found on the underside of azalea leaves

Control can be accomplished if the life cycles are broken early. Sprays should be timed for the first appearance of adults or nymphs in the spring just after the blooms have faded. Two or more applications of a control measure may be needed because of multiple generations.

Dislodging lace bugs from infested plants with a strong stream of water may be sufficient to disrupt populations early in the season. It will probably take several soakings, and even this may not be enough. This approach may only knock the insects off the plants, rather than kill them.

Insecticidal soaps can be effective. Insecticidal soaps are useful in controlling azalea lace bug nymphs but will have no effect against lace bug eggs. All stages of the lace bug are found on the undersides of leaves. Spraying only on the upper surfaces will have no effect, as the treatment will not come in contact with the targeted pest. Thorough coverage of the undersurfaces of the foliage and several applications may be required for complete control.

If more than fifteen percent of the foliage is damaged, then a conventional insecticide application may be justified. Insecticides containing carbaryl, cyfluthrin, deltamethrin, imidacloprid and malathion are just a few that are registered in Florida for use against lace bugs. For a complete list, review the UF/IFAS publication about lace bugs available online at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/MG326> or call your local Extension office.



The foliage on the left shows a small amount of lace bug damage. The foliage on the right is almost white, indicating a severe infestation.

Be sure to follow all label directions when using a pesticide. Good control of the first generation will greatly reduce problems later in the season. Continue to inspect the plants periodically and apply control measures if plants become reinfested. Be aware, the brown spots and stippling will remain on leaves even after pest populations have been reduced.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others. For additional information about all of the county extension services and other articles of interest go to: <http://www.santarosa.fl.gov/extension>