Spencer Horticultural Solutions

Homegrown Horticulture

TIPS FOR SUCCESS IN YOUR OWN BACKYARD

Aphids

There are many different types of aphids that you might find holding a family picnic on the various plants around your yard and garden. For the most part, knowing the difference between a green peach aphid and a foxglove aphid is not important to the home gardener. However, it is good to know a bit about aphids and their behavior, so you can better manage them. They all act similarly.

As a general rule, aphids are small, soft-bodied insects. Their body shape can vary somewhat; however, they are mostly tear-drop or pear-shaped. They can be different colours, which often relates to what they are feeding on. They also have antennae, 3 pairs of legs, and a pair of little tubes that stick off their backend (officially called “cornicles” but might be referred to as “butt tubes”). Aphids of different ages look pretty much the same. Most aphids are wingless; however, they will occasionally produce a winged stage when they need to travel between hosts.

Aphids are almost all females, although they will occasionally produce males for mating at specific times. Aphids give birth to live young (again, occasionally eggs, but only in specific situations), with each female producing up to 100 offspring over a few weeks. They mature within about a week to 10 days, which means that they can build up a big population quickly. They congregate in large groups in sheltered areas on the plant, feeding by piercing and sucking out the plant juices.

Feeding by aphids can cause plants to become a bit deformed, especially when populations get quite large. You might also find that plant parts can become a bit swollen or disfigured in strange ways, depending on the plant and how it responds to attack. Their inefficient feeding results in a sticky sap (called honeydew) often “raining” down on lower leaves, and you might find a sooty, black mould growing on the plants. You might also find ants “guarding” or “herding” colonies of aphids, essentially harvesting the sugary sap.

Controlling aphids isn’t always required, but if a population builds up, a spot spray might be enough to knock it back. Most products need to have contact with the aphids and will usually need two or three applications. You can also encourage natural predators, but this can take time to build up. In a pinch, blast the plant with higher pressure water to knock many of the aphids away. It isn’t perfect, but it won’t hurt anything.