Common azalea lace bug can be controlled

Azalea lace bugs are one of the most common insect pests of azaleas. If you have azaleas, you’ll eventually have azalea lace bugs. But with a little knowledge, you can easily control these insects that discolor the leaves of azaleas.

Lace bugs live on the underside of leaves and damage their hosts by piercing leaves with their straw-like mouthparts and removing the plant’s juices. Infested leaves have tiny yellow spots on the top surface and are discolored with dark, varnish-like excrement and old insect parts on the underside. Azalea plants really begin to look unhealthy as insect numbers increase through the spring and summer.

Azalea lace bugs spend the winter as eggs on the underside of azalea leaves. They hatch in early to mid-March and then begin to feed and develop into adults.

Lace bugs complete their first generation by late April. Then they proceed to increase in number throughout the remainder of the spring, summer and fall. These insects can complete three to five generations in a single growing season. In late September adult lace bugs of the final generation for the season lay eggs that will carry the population through the cold winter.

The key to easily controlling azalea lace bugs is to properly time the control efforts.

Inspect your plants in early spring to see if the insects are present. Look for leaves that are whitish to yellow on the top surface (they may be mottled in appearance) and have small, dark, varnish-like spots on the undersides. If the leave damage is heavy, continue to check the plants every week for small lace bugs. You should begin to see them in late March through April.

Early to mid spring is the best time to control the first generation of the bugs. Proper timing of the insecticide application will reduce the need for further sprays during the rest of the growing season.

Insecticides such as malathion, permethrin and Orthene can be used for the control of lace bugs on azaleas. You can also get good control by using a horticultural oil or soap spray. There are commercially available insecticidal soap sprays on the market or you can make your own by mixing two tablespoons of a liquid dishwashing soap per gallon of water. Avoid the use of soaps containing all the modern day additives such as hand softeners, fragrances, degreasers, etc. These may injure the foliage of your plants.

Make sure you spray the backs of the leaves. And only spray early in the morning or late in the evening when it’s cooler but never during the heat of the day or when the plant is in full sun. Follow instructions on the pesticide label concerning mixing, application and safety precautions.

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