

RED SPIDER MITES ON PLANTS IN THE HEAT

On your daily walk around your garden in the summer, you spy some dark brown burnt spots on the underside of leaves, maybe on your pepper or tomato plants. On closer inspection you may see tiny red or green spots and possibly some webbing covering some or all of the leaves. This tiny arachnid is a spider mite and infestations occur when the temperatures are above 80° F. Other names for this pest are Red Spider Mite and Two Spotted Mite.

These tiny mites suck nutrients, chlorophyll, and moisture out of the underside of leaves for nourishment before laying transparent spherical eggs. Dense, very sticky webbing on the leaves protects the eggs but prevents sunlight and transpiration, thus hindering photosynthesis. Placing a white sheet of paper under the leaves and tapping the mites on to it will reveal the tiny spider mites. Also, wiping the underside of the leaves with a soft cloth will show red streaks. The female mites live about one month and lay hundreds of eggs. Should the temperature fall below 70° F. the females go into diapause or dormancy and their eggs are not fertilized.

Finding the mites at the start of an infestation by observing the garden daily with a walk-about is a great way to prevent damage to plant materials. A strong spray of water on the underside of leaves will wash away mites. There are also several miticides available to the homeowner and label directions should always be followed. Neem oil, horticultural soaps, and predatory insects are sustainable ways to control mite infestations. Note that lady beetles can consume over 5,000 mites per day both in the adult and larval stages of the insect. Minute Pirate Bugs and Lacewings are also beneficial insects that control spider mites without the need to utilize pesticides which can unintentionally increase populations of the mites. When pesticides are used, they are not targeted on the mites alone but, instead, also kill beneficial insects. When beneficial predators are killed, future populations of mites have no natural controls and can multiply even more abundantly. Keeping plants well hydrated in drought conditions of the summer also make it difficult for spider mites to damage plants at the cellular level.

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