

Spring is a Good Time to Manage Lace Bugs

Most lacebugs overwinter as eggs and hatch in the spring. Therefore, early spring is a good time to control them before they hatch.

Lace bugs attack azaleas, some rhododendrons, and many ornamental shrubs. They feed mainly on the undersides of the leaves, leaving the top of the leaf with white to yellow stippling or flecking. Heavy lace bug feeding on azaleas can reduce plant vigor and flowering and affects the overall look of the plant. (See Fig 1)



Fig 1

Fig 2

Lace bugs attack a broad range of evergreen and deciduous trees and shrubs and often go undetected until the infested plants show severe damage. Lace bug damage can be confirmed by the presence of brown to black droplets of excrement and old “skins” of the nymphs on the underside of damaged leaves (See Fig. 2).

Adult lace bugs are about 1/8-inch (3 mm) long with a sculptured dorsal (upper) surface. The expanded surfaces of their thorax and forewings have numerous, semitransparent cells that give the body a lacelike appearance, hence the name "lace bugs." (See Fig 3). The wingless nymphs are smaller, oval, and usually dark colored with spines.



Fig 3

Natural enemies of lace bugs include parasitic wasps, predatory assassin bugs, lacewing larvae, lady beetles, jumping spiders, pirate bugs, and mites. These beneficial species may not appear in sufficient numbers until after lace bugs become abundant, but their preservation is an essential part of a long-term, integrated pest management (IPM) program.

Insecticides will not restore appearance but can reduce or prevent further damage. Apply insecticide only when pests are present. *Read and follow the product label instructions for the safe and effective use of that insecticide.*

Monitoring. Plants should be monitored weekly in the spring, summer and fall for the presence of lace bugs. As initial damage symptoms may not be apparent, it is important to sample the leaves and observe the undersides with a powerful hand lens. Lace bugs can also be detected by beating the shrub (to dislodge) and collecting them on a white sheet of paper.

Cultural control: Maintaining healthy plants with proper watering and fertilizer treatments reduces plant stress. Growing azaleas in shadier areas also reduces damage.

Mechanical control. A hard jet of water from a garden hose could be directed on the undersides of the foliage to dislodge the bugs and possibly kill the nymphs, but any remaining live lace bugs may still damage the foliage.

Chemical control. Spring is the best time to control the first or second generation of lace bugs. Insecticidal soap, horticultural oil, neem oil and most synthetic insecticides provide good control. It is important to direct the spray to undersides of the leaves for optimal coverage. Some systemic insecticides could also provide season-long control if poured around the roots of azaleas in spring.