

Organic Pest and Disease Control Guide

Controlling Pests & Their Diseases Organically

By: R. Renée Bembry

Using organic methods to control pests and diseases in a garden is the safest way to help vegetables, foliage, and flowers prosper and grow. Organic pest and disease controls allow gardeners to enjoy their gardens the natural way using products that are free of poisonous pesticides that can make plants unsafe to touch. Likewise, vegetable and fruit growers can worry less about how much they rinse their garden veggies and fruits when they keep pests and diseases away from their crops using organic controls.

This guide will present different strategies for organically controlling garden pests and diseases to help keep you and your family safe and free of chemical based plant products around your home.

Organic pest control methods overview

Organic pest control methods can gravely differ from pesticidal control methods for fighting pests and diseases. Whereas pesticidal controls often call for spraying or sprinkling liquid or flaky chemicals on or near your plants, organic controls often call for physically removing pests from plants or setting out enemies to get rid of them for you. Although organic controls may sometimes call for spraying to control garden pests, most of the time organic sprays consist of water as opposed to harsh chemicals and other times organic sprays consist mainly of gentle soapy solutions.

Determining which organic garden control method to use

Specific methods gardeners use when controlling pests and diseases organically depends on three factors. (1) The pest or disease they are battling. (2) The availability of live controls if any that preys on specific pests. (3) Choosing between organic pest control "options" when options are available.

The type of organic pest controls you should use for your garden depends on the types of plants you grow and the types of pests infesting the plants. This means, for example, if you are growing plants that become infested with aphids, you can control aphids by using specific aphid controls.

Control aphids by spraying, providing live enemies, et cetera

Aphids may be one of the trickiest tiny pests to get rid of because they are so small gardeners may not notice them when viewing plants their plants at first. In addition, aphids are fliers so simply knocking them from plants will probably not get rid of them. You can get rid of aphids using one of the following organic control methods:

(1) Spray aphids with a garden hose. Allow water force to be strong enough to knock aphids from plants but not so strong that you damage the plants. Also, spray aphids with the hose nozzle pointing upward from the underside of infested plant leaves. When aphids find plants they like, they do not care whether they infest the upper ends or the lower ends. Sometimes, aphids infest plant inner areas as well.

(2) Set bugs loose on the aphid-ridden plants. Bugs that eat aphids include ladybugs and lacewings. You can set out adult lacewings or use lacewing larvae.

(3) Use soap and water to wash away aphids by hand or spray

soapy water from a spray bottle. Using soap to spray aphids rather than spraying with water only may take longer than spraying with a hose, however, spray bottles use less water and lingering aphids often die from the soap.

(4) Use a spray containing potassium salts such as “Safer Insect Soap” which is listed for organic use by OMRI (Organic Materials Review Institute).

(5) Physically remove plant parts such as leaves and flower heads if aphids have not dominated infected plants. Tightly wrap removed plant parts in a bag so the aphids cannot escape and then throw the bag in the trash.

(6) Keep ant levels down in your yard. Ants scare natural aphid eating predators.

Lacewing and lacewing larvae

If you decide to use lacewings to control aphids organically in your garden, you can use some of the lacewings to control other plants as well. Lacewing and lacewing larvae can minimize plant loss by eating loopers, corn earworms, cabbageworms, mites, mealybugs, and geranium budworms.

Keep lacewings in your garden

Lacewings are likely to fly away from your garden after all the aphids or other pests they prey on are gone. You can keep lacewings around longer by providing them protein enriched “wheast”. Keeping lacewing around longer is a good way to ensure they will continue to battle pests in your garden. You can make a simple wheast spray by mixing water with a little sugar and yeast.

Other live pest controls

Trichogramma wasps – Parasitic wasps such as trichogramma destroy cabbageworm and looper eggs. They destroy corn earworm eggs and geranium budworm eggs as well.

Aphytis wasps – Use aphytis wasps to control scale.

Encarsia wasps – Encarsia wasps love to eat whiteflies.

Cryptolaemus beetles – Cryptolaemus beetles prey on mealybugs.

Phytoseiulus persimilis mites – Certain mites such as phytoseiulus persimilis eat other mites.

Control plants using other plants

Some plants can actually protect other plants in your garden! For instance, you may be able to shield plants from whiteflies by planting “shoofly” plants near plants that whiteflies attack. Whiteflies do not like shoofly plants and thus will not go near your “shielded” plant.

Remove pests by hand

Some wormy pests squish easily when removed from plants. You can keep bug juice off your hands by wearing gloves or using plastic wrap or similar items to remove the bugs. You can also try to get the bugs to crawl onto a stick or twig.

Cabbageworms and loopers can be taken off cabbage leaves by hand.

Earworms can be handpicked as well. You can also control earworms using mineral oil.

Handpick cutworms and armyworms to protect tomatoes and beans.

Earwigs are easily removed by hand when you see them. You can often find them in garden locations camped out beneath rocks, leaves, wood planks and other debris. Another way to control earwigs is to collect them in newspapers. Roll the newspapers gently to encourage earwigs to crawl into the paper folds and leave the rolled papers outdoors overnight. Any earwigs you find when examining the newspaper the following morning can be removed from the garden.

Grasshoppers can be removed by hand or by attracting birds that eat them, such as sparrows. You can also control grasshoppers by cultivating grasshopper soil to destroy the grasshopper eggs.

Mites and scale insects can be washed from plants using a hose as discussed with aphids above.

Pick snails and slugs by hand or if you are not squeamish simply step on them. When you pick snails, they will probably die if you toss them causing their shells to break. Tossing slugs will probably not harm them much. You must squash slugs or enclose them in a bag and throw them in the trash. Another way to remove snails and slugs is to sprinkle salt near the plants you are trying to protect. Note, however, that salt raises the alkaline level in the soil which may not be good for your plants.

Plant diseases

Organic controls for Plant Diseases include methods to sanitize plants and to cut away infected plant parts. In addition, infected plants can simply be replaced. An unusual and less known procedure is to blow torch certain plants.

Fire blight – Fire blight is an extremely quick moving bacterial plant disease that often infects fruit trees. Plants such as cherry trees that contract fire blight should have the fire blight disease removed by cutting away infected plant parts. Sterilize plant tools to prevent spreading the disease to uninfected plants unless trees are dormant when the fire blight is removed.

You can also blow torch fire blight at temperatures between 150 and 160 degrees Fahrenheit. Do not char infested fire blight cankers.

Blossoms infested with fire blight should also be removed immediately.

Use Mycoshield, which can help prevent damage to pears. Mycoshield is OMRI certificated.

Purchase Plants from Reliable Growers

Purchasing your plants from nurseries is one way to ensure your plants will be pest and disease free. Gardeners take risks of infecting plants they already have when they trade plants with other gardeners, purchase plants at swap meets, or pick plants growing in the wild.

Whether debugging and ridding diseases from vegetable gardens or controlling pests and diseases in landscaping gardens, gardens will benefit from reduced pests and disease levels and you will benefit from not having to handle plants covered with pesticides when you control garden pests and diseases organically.