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Azalea lace bug and azalea petal blight

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If azalea foliage or flowers are being spoiled by lace bug or petal blight, preventative action – taken at the right time of year – can ease the problem.

Azalea lace bug

Identification and symptoms of attack

Azalea lace bug (*Stephanitis pyrioides*) is an introduced insect. Its common name comes from the raised network of veins on its clear, hardened forewings. Adults are 4–6 mm long, and mottled black and tan. Nymphs (juveniles) are similarly coloured, but smaller and spiny in appearance, and they undergo a number of moults before they reach maturity.

Lace bugs congregate on the undersides of azalea and rhododendron leaves. There they suck out the sap, robbing the plant of nutrients and causing the leaves to turn speckled grey-brown or silvery. The nymphs excrete honeydew, a sugary liquid on which sooty mould develops. If this coating becomes dense it decreases photosynthesis, further reducing the plant's health.

The damage is similar to that caused by thrips. To find out whether lace bugs are the cause, beat the affected foliage over a white cloth where any insects that fall can be seen easily. Cast skins shed by the nymphs are another clue to lace bugs' presence.

Management and control

To avoid over-use of chemicals, try to exercise tolerance whenever possible. A little damaged foliage can be pruned, and minor occurrences of lace bug do not harm the plant seriously. Also bear in mind that the general condition of the plant may be the factor that determines the scale of attack. An azalea growing in a hot sunny location, where it suffers water stress, is more vulnerable.

In the event of heavy infestations, spraying azaleas with a systemic insecticide – which the bugs ingest when they suck the sap – is effective but timing is crucial. Lace bugs do not travel far or fast and it takes a long while for them to reach harmful numbers. So, provided the spray is timed correctly, a single treatment should be enough to kill a localised infestation and prevent a recurrence for one or maybe even two years.



Azalea lace bug

Lace bugs go through several generations during summer, so spraying the azaleas then is futile because eggs are constantly hatching. However, eggs laid in autumn lie dormant over winter and hatch in spring. The new season's nymphs do not emerge all at one moment, so spraying too early will kill only the first of them. But one application of systemic insecticide in late to mid spring will kill the later emerging nymphs as well as the earlier ones before they reach adulthood.

Nursery and garden centre staff can recommend the most suitable systemic insecticide.



Azalea foliage damaged by azalea lace bug
(Photo: Courtesy of John Colwill)

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Azalea petal blight (Photos: Courtesy of John Colwill)

Azalea petal blight

Symptoms of infection

Petal blight in azalea species and cultivars is caused by *Ovulinia azaleae*, a fungal disease. The first signs are small spots that look water-soaked. These enlarge rapidly and merge. Within two or three days, whole flowers become limp and slimy, and then turn light brown. The rotted flowers do not drop readily and, when they do, tend to adhere to the foliage where they can remain stuck for many weeks.

Life cycle of the fungus

Ovulinia azaleae over-winters in the form of sclerotia (hard-coated survival bodies) on the previous season's diseased flowers, or in the surface soil and leaf litter beneath the plant. When the azalea is nearing its flowering time, the sclerotia germinate. Small, almost microscopic, cup-shaped fruiting bodies are produced, from which spores are discharged.

Moist conditions allow the disease to develop. Periods of frequent rainfall or misty weather that coincide with flowering time will accelerate the rate of infection. Overhead watering has the same effect.

Control

To begin the new season well, pick off any diseased flowers that have hung on from the previous year and remove leaf litter from beneath infected plants.

By the time spots appear on the petals of the new season's flowers, it is usually too late to combat the disease with fungicide. However, fungicide can be used as a protector. As such, it needs to be applied just before bud opening. The best time to spray is when the green buds begin to show their flower colour. For continuing protection, spray again every 7–10 days throughout the flowering period.

Nursery and garden centre staff can recommend the most suitable fungicide.