Integrated pest management in the home garden

Source: Ric Bessin, extension professor, UK Department of Entomology

If you’re a gardener, at one time or another, you’ve had pest problems. Insects or animals decide your plants are the best place to dine and reproduce. What’s a gardener to do?

Many gardeners are concerned about using pesticides, and rightly so. Some pesticides, if handled improperly, can cause more harm than good on nontarget organisms, which include other plants as well as you, your children, pets and the environment. You can address these concerns by implementing integrated pest management practices in your garden.

Farmers have used integrated pest management successfully for almost 50 years. What works for them can also work for the home gardener. Known as IPM, integrated pest management is a strategy to control pests with minimum impact on other organisms.

You know the old saying about an ounce of prevention. Don’t wait for trouble to climb over your garden fence. Check your plants several times a week. Inspect the undersides of leaves and the inner parts of the plant where insects can shelter. Take a flashlight into the garden at night and check for nocturnal pests like slugs and moths.

If you find something, don’t panic. Decide if you can live with the damage you’re seeing. Sure, you have some holes in your potato leaves, but otherwise, is the plant healthy? Did you just lose a cucumber plant to wilt, and are you afraid of it infecting other plants in the plot?

Identify the cause of the problem. Is it a disease or an insect infestation? Don’t assume that because you’re seeing bugs on your plants that they’re the culprits. Beneficial insects might be dining on or reproducing in other, not-so-beneficial insects. Nature can often take care of itself. If you want to give her a little help, pick off the few pests you find before they can cause major damage.

There are a lot of resource materials on the internet that can help you identify pests and diseases. If you need more help, ask your local extension office. Learn all you can about the pest’s life cycle. In doing so, you’ll be able to time your “attack” to when the creature is most susceptible.

Keep your plants healthy. A healthy plant can fend off or withstand disease or an insect infestation better. Know your plants’ nutrient needs and fertilize accordingly. Without enough fertilizer, a plant is stressed and vulnerable to pest attack, and a plant with too much fertilizer may have excess growth that attracts disease and insect pests.

For the same reason, provide adequate water for your plants. Under- or over-watered plants suffer stress that can reduce their natural resilience.

Keep your garden clean. Remove any plant debris that could harbor pests, and keep your garden weed-free. Allowing weeds to grow provides habitat for insects and diseases. Weeds also compete with garden plants for important resources such as nutrients and water. Regularly clean your garden tools in a solution of one part bleach to nine parts water or wipe them with rubbing alcohol or a disinfecting spray.

Slugs and snails like to hide under boards, plastic sheeting or unused flowerpots. By eliminating those hiding spots, you can cut back on the number of slimy plant predators that show up for a twilight snack.

A useful technique to dislodge aphids, mites, lacebugs, mealybugs and spittlebugs is to hit them with a forceful stream of water. Don’t forget to spray the undersides of leaves, as well. Do this early in the day so the plants can dry before evening.

These are just a few of the many useful, non-toxic methods you can use to protect your garden crops. However, if you feel you need to use a pesticide, read the label instructions. The label will tell you if it is the correct pesticide for the plant and the pest and also gives you important information on the number of days you’ll need to wait to harvest edible plants after application. The label is the law!

For more information check out the extension publication ENT-69 at <http://www2.ca.uky.edu/agcomm/pubs/ent/ent69/ent69.pdf> or contact the (COUNTY NAME) office of the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service.

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