

Aphids in Texas



More than 250 species of aphids, often called “plant lice,” feed on agricultural and horticultural crops throughout the world, and several can be a problem in Texas landscapes. Many ornamental plants in Texas landscapes are suitable hosts for aphids, including bedding plants (especially chrysanthemums), ash, barberry, boxelder, crape myrtle, jasmine, flowering almond, gardenia, hibiscus, hydrangea, mountain ash, oaks, oleander, peach, pear, pecans, pines, roses, vegetables, and viburnum. Aphid infestations can build to severe levels very rapidly because these insects reproduce very quickly. Infestations can be widespread or localized to just a few plants, and they may be worse in some years than in others.

Identification

Aphids are tiny true bugs with piercing, sucking mouthparts designed to suck the juices from plants. They are usually wingless and pear-shaped. You can recognize aphids easily by the pair of “cornicles” projecting from their hind ends – two tiny “tailpipes” that other soft-bodied insects. Aphids are soft-bodied and vary in shape and color depending on species and host plant.

Life Cycle

The aphid life cycle is unusual in that females can birth live young, and do so without mating. Aphids overwinter as eggs, from which wingless females hatch in spring. These females give rise quickly to the next generation of Amazon aphids, and the cycle continues throughout the growing season. As fall approaches, aphids begin producing some males with which they mate. Only then do the female aphids rely on traditional reproductive methods, laying eggs that will carry her genes through the winter months.

Damage to Plants

Aphids draw sap from plant tissue (phloem) using mouthparts adapted for piercing and sucking. Some aphids feed on foliage, while others feed on the twigs, limbs, branches, fruits, flowers, or roots of plants. Some species inject toxic salivary secretions into plants as they feed. If left unchecked, aphids can stunt plant growth, deform and discolor leaves and fruit, or cause galls to form on leaves, stems, and roots. Curled or yellowed leaves. Stunted growth. Blackening on foliage (sooty mold).

Monitoring Population Levels

Aphid populations are best monitored by routine (once or twice a week) visual inspections of plants that are potential hosts. Aphids can occur anywhere on the plants, but they are often found on the underside of the leaves or on the new growth. Yellow sticky cards, available from garden stores and nurseries, are effective tools for monitoring winged aphid populations, particularly in greenhouses.

Common Species of Aphids in Texas Landscapes



Green Peach Aphid, *Myzus persicae* (Sulzer)

Also known as tobacco or spinach aphid, adults of this species are small, usually less than 1/8 inch long. The body varies in color from pink to green, sometimes with three darker stripes down the back, and the head supports long antennae and red eyes.

Habitat and food sources. The green peach aphid has a wide range of host plants, including peaches, vegetables, and ornamental crops (flowering and bedding plants including chrysanthemums)



Crape Myrtle Aphid, *Tinocallis kahawaluokalani* (Kirkaldy)

Habitat and food sources. This aphid specifically infests crape myrtle.



Oleander Aphid, *Aphis nerii* Boyer de Fonscolombe

This is a bright yellow aphid with black legs and cornicles.

Habitat and food sources. Host plants are restricted to oleander, butterfly weed, and milkweed.

Management Considerations

- Use a strong spray of water to knock aphids from sturdy plants.
- Attract beneficial insects to your garden. Most predatory insects will feast on aphids when they are present in high numbers. Avoid using broad spectrum pesticides that will kill beneficials along with pests.
- Don't over fertilize your plants. When you give your aphid-infested plants a nitrogen boost, you're actually boosting aphid reproduction and creating a bigger problem.
- Keep the garden free of weeds, and check for infested ornamentals near your vegetable garden that might harbor aphids.
- When possible, prune any heavily infested shoots from plants and destroy them, aphids and all.
- Apply Neem oil, horticultural soap, or horticultural oil when appropriate. These products work on contact, so repeat applications will be necessary. Be sure to get the undersides of leaves where aphids may be hiding.