GARDEN Q&A

How to control spotted lanternfly?

Hint: stop squishing

By Miri Talabac

Q: My yard seems to be swarming with lanternflies this year. How can I control them without harming pollinators or other insects? They jump too easily for me to squish them.

A: This may come as a surprise, given the early messaging from the Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA) to squish them on sight, but you don't need to do much at this point. The initial advice from the MDA, when spotted lanternfly first arrived in Maryland out of Pennsylvania around 2018, was intended to slow the spread of this new pest by reducing the local populations while researchers investigated ecosystem impacts.

That ship has since sailed, though, as spotted lanternfly now occupies almost all of Maryland and appears in at least part of over a dozen states. To be fair, a person will not be able to put much of a dent in the population anyway, since many are up in the treetops or on vegetation you can't get to. Fortunately, observations thus far suggest that this insect is not causing widespread disruption or damage to natural areas or gardens. If you see them on a plant that looks damaged, odds are the issue lies with some other problem.

As a member of the planthopper group of insects, lanternfly is, as you noted, hard to catch. They scoot around to the opposite side of the leaf or stem if you get too close, and they jump with surprising vigor when you try to catch them. (This can be great entertainment.) The same will happen if someone attempts to spray them, which means that it won't accomplish much, since any contact insecticide would need to directly coat their bodies to be effective. Dried spray residues the nymphs might walk over later will not have much impact, unless someone used a long-residual, more-toxic insecticide, which I absolutely do not recommend.

Even if organic spray attempts were successful, the use of one of those lower-toxicity ingredients — horticultural oil or insecticidal soap — is still fairly broad-spectrum. This means it will potentially harm other insects if spray residues coat them in the process (especially juveniles, like caterpillars or flower fly larvae that are hunting aphids). There is no pesticide, organic or otherwise, that will only affect spotted lanternfly and no other insects. Plus, if used in hot weather, even those lower-risk pesticides might "burn" foliage, causing damage to plants more extensive and prominent than anything the lanternflies are doing.

Most Ask Extension inquiries about spotted lanternfly so far this year have been from Baltimore County. Anecdotally, the population crest seen by Harford and Cecil counties in prior years seems to have waned, a pattern expected to repeat itself as the wave of booming spotted lanternfly populations makes its way across the state. Remember brown marmorated stink bug, a nuisance pest that was new to Maryland in the early 2000s? This invasion will probably follow the same cycle – cresting and then subsiding to a background level – but time will tell.

Late-stage nymph of the invasive insect spotted lanternfly. **MIRI TALABAC**

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Get bragging rights by planting peanuts

Southern climates not required to grow legume successfully

By Jessica Damiano
Associated Press

Peanuts are generally grown in southern climes.

Most come from China, India, Nigeria and the southern U.S., which all fall squarely in climates in or similar to USDA hardiness zones 8 to 11. Which is to say, their summers are long enough to allow for the up to 150 days necessary for the plants to reach maturity.

But with some planning, home growers as far north as zone 6 can also have success growing peanuts for snacking, peanut butter and, of course, bragging rights.

If you live in one of those more northern areas, direct sowing isn't possible, so you'll have to purchase starter plants or start seeds early indoors (or in a greenhouse, if you have one). Then transplant them outdoors two to three weeks after the danger of frost has passed.

With that date in mind, research your first fall frost date and calculate whether there are enough days between them to allow your chosen peanut variety to mature: Valencia takes 90 to 110 days; Spanish, 90 to 120; Virginia and runner types, 130 to 150.

If not, calculate the number of extra days (but no less than 14) they'll need to develop indoors and start seeds accordingly. Don't subtract more days because starting seeds too early can result in leggy, stressed plants.

In my Long Island, New York, garden, I would aim for an early April start date.

I recommend buying seeds from a specialty garden center or a seed catalog. Yes, you can theoretically crack open raw, unsalted, in-the-shell peanuts from the grocery store and plant them — and if you do, take care not to remove the red seed coat — but you'll have no way of knowing which variety you are planting or how long they've been sitting in their shells and under what conditions.

Dig up peanut plants, shake off excess soil, and place in a dry spot with good air circulation for two to three days. **GEORGIA PEANUT COMMISSION**

Self-pollinating yellow flowers will emerge roughly 40 days after planting. **SOUTHERN PEANUT GROWERS**

Peanuts clinging to a pulled-up plant in Bay Shore, New York. **MELANIE SMITH**

In zones 8 to 11, plant seeds directly outdoors in full sun (a south-facing slope is ideal) between mid-April and mid-June. Loosen soil and sow 2 inches deep and 10 inches apart in rows 20 inches apart. Keep the soil moist until they sprout, then provide 1 to 1½ inches of water per week, including rainfall.

In zones 6 and 7, sow seeds indoors about 1 inch deep in individual biodegradable pots, and place them under grow lights or by your sunniest window. Water about once a week and transplant the entire pot outdoors two to three weeks after the soil temperature has warmed to at least 60 degrees and the danger of frost has passed. Starter plants, if using, should be set out at the same time.

Hill soil around the bottoms of plants, as you would potatoes, beginning when they are a foot tall, by applying 2 inches of straw or dried grass clippings around them to encourage "pegging," or underground seed production. Those seeds are peanuts, so they must be dug up to be harvested.

Because peanuts aren't actually nuts but rather legumes, like beans and peas, they capture nitrogen from the air and add it to the soil, so avoid applying nitrogen fertilizers around plants.

Self-pollinating yellow flowers will emerge roughly 40 days after planting. Petal drop is a sign that peanut formation, or pegging, has begun underground.

Depending on your variety and growing conditions, leaves will turn yellow about four to five months after seeds are planted, signaling it's time to harvest. Dig up plants — roots and all — shake off excess soil, and place in a dry spot with good air circulation for two to three days until the remaining foliage dries completely.

Remove peanut pods from roots, then roast, or store unshelled peanuts in airtight containers. They'll keep for about a year.

Jessica Damiano writes weekly gardening columns for The Associated Press and publishes the award-winning Weekly Dirt Newsletter.