GARDEN Q&A

How can I get rid of spotted lanternflies?

By Miri Talabac

A spotted lanternfly at a vineyard in Kutztown, Pennsylvania. MATT ROURKE/AP 2019

Q: Lanternflies seem to be everywhere in my yard. What can I use to get rid of them?

A: Nothing will get rid of them for long, but natural controls are gradually suppressing the population. Spotted lanternfly (SLF), the invasive insect that many people can't escape on the news or out in the garden, is becoming more abundant in some counties as it spreads across Maryland. This insect has been in our region for just over a decade now, even though some social media and news stories are making them sound like a new and urgent hazard to local ecosystems and home landscapes.

Extension receives lots of questions about SLF all year long, with concerns about how to kill these insects and protect gardens. Fortunately, based on years of study, this insect is not a direct threat to home garden plants. Granted, high levels of honeydew (sugar-water waste) produced by abundant lanternflies can foster heavy layers of sooty mold that can block light from coated leaves, but on deciduous plants, this effect is only temporary since the leaves are falling off anyway in a couple more months.

We don't need to go out of our way to kill SLF at home. It was prudent to stem the spread of the pest when it was brand new, when scientists needed to learn what its impacts would be, but that ship has long since sailed, with SLF present to some degree in nearly every Maryland county and over a dozen states. Vineyards and hops growers are more at risk of economic consequences from SLF feeding, but the use of chemical means to combat these insects on residential properties is not recommended.

I cannot stress that enough: it is not practical or recommended to use a pesticide to combat SLF. Not only will low-toxicity options not work very well, but other ingredients will have a greater risk of harm to other organisms, including pollinators, predators eating SLF and other harmless insects (fireflies, ladybugs, etc.). This is especially true for pyrethroids, a class of chemicals common to broad-spectrum insecticides, even if certain products are marketed towards a particular insect or spider group (like wasps). At least one product features SLF on its label, which is misleading since users might think that's the only insect it impacts.

Be sure to discuss your options if hiring a professional, as broad-spectrum systemic products are commonly used in the form of tree trunk injections or soil drenches. These systemic products can move into all parts of the plant, potentially impacting pollinators, caterpillars and other beneficial insects.

If you can't ignore SLF and must do something, find a fly swatter and go to town, only once you've positively identified the insect of course (I've seen many misidentifications). You can also identify and remove/squish egg masses in winter, though many of them will be out of reach in tree canopies or out of sight on other objects. Inspect your car before taking a road trip from an infested or quarantined area to a location without SLF, but otherwise, be assured that diseases and predators like birds, bats, spiders, and other insects are reducing their numbers.

Q: My daylilies look pretty tired and disheveled this time of year. Can they be refreshed?

A: Yes, you can begin by removing any brown, shriveled leaves: yanking them up with a sharp tug is usually successful, but if they don't detach, you can cut them off. Removing spent flowers will also improve their appearance (individual daylily blooms usually only last a day before withering).

You can also cut back live foliage that is too much of an eyesore due to infection symptoms or other accumulated damage, as the plant can produce a replacement flush of new leaves. Often, this is done when a mature clump is divided, either for propagation or to encourage blooming when a crowded plant doesn't flower as well after a few years of vigorous growth. You can cut the foliage to about 6 to 8 inches off the ground (some references suggest even lower), but if you see new leaves emerging when you trim, avoid cutting them in the process. Full regrowth may take a few weeks to fill back in.

Do not add any removed leaves with disease symptoms to a compost pile unless you keep the pile hot (actively composting, not passive and "cool," which will not kill pathogens).

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