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How Can I Control The Tiny Pests Flying Around My Plants?

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A weekly question/answer column

How Can I Control The Tiny Pests Flying Around My Plants?

Diane Alston answers:*

If you have tiny, flying pests that have made your plants their home, you are not alone. These pests, called fungus gnats, are a common indoor plant problem. The gnat larvae live in the potting soil and feed on the roots of the plants. This can cause poor plant health as well as root rot. The adult gnats are a dark black. After they breed, they fly around the plants and land on the soil to lay their eggs. Consider these tips for control.

- The gnat larvae will not survive in soil that dries thoroughly between waterings. The first and most important step is to watch your watering pattern. To avoid water stressing your plants, water thoroughly each time, but only after the soil has completely dried. You may need to water different plants on different schedules depending on pot size and how quickly the soil dries between waterings.
- If you have too much organic matter in your potting mix, it can hold the water too long. You may need to repot your plants and use a soil mixture with more sand or soil and less organic matter.
- The best chemical control for the pests is targeted at the larvae. Products that work well for larvae control can be applied directly to the soil. Some of them include: Gnatrol, a natural bacteria that attacks insects; beneficial nematodes, parasites that feed on insects; or Diazinon. Chemicals that target the adult gnats will quickly reduce their numbers, but usually work best when applied in combination with chemical control for the larvae. Some of them are Diazinon, insecticidal soap, Permethrin, or Pyrethrin. These can be applied directly to the leaves of the plants.

* Diane Alston is Utah State University Extension Entomologist