

Hot Topics - Pinal County

September 10, 2007 – Sweet Potato Whitefly Update

Sweet potato whiteflies can be a huge problem for gardeners and landscapers in the low desert areas of Pinal County. Large numbers can often be found on lantana, tomatoes, squash and other plants during the months of September and early October as the temperatures begin to cool. Recent observations in Casa Grande indicate that the populations are beginning to increase at this time and those tending susceptible plants are advised to watch for signs of infestation.

These small insects eat by sucking plant juices up a tube-like mouthpart. Feeding by large populations can seriously damage, stunt or destroy a large variety of garden and landscape plants. The adult sweet potato whitefly is a small insect, about the size of a pinhead, and flutters around close to susceptible plants. Its body is colored yellow.

The control method that has been shown to be most effective to date for homeowners is a spray of detergent, cooking oil and water. It does not give complete control, but it is the best that we currently have. Because this mix may harm certain plants, it is best to start with a light rate and test it on a leaf that is not critical to the overall appearance of the plant. If no damage occurs after 12 hours, spray the entire plant.

Make a stock solution of cooking oil and detergent by mixing 1 cup of vegetable-based cooking oil such as corn, cottonseed, safflower, soybean or sunflower oil, plus 1 tablespoon of dishwashing detergent or insecticidal soap available from most nurseries. The final spray solution will then consist of 1 cup of water plus 1 to 2 teaspoons of the stock solution. Make sure to completely cover the underside of leaves where the immature nymphs are hidden. Repeat every three to four days as needed.

If you have questions, you can reach one of the Master Gardeners at the Cooperative Extension office, 820 E. Cottonwood Lane, Building C, in Casa Grande.