

COASTAL GARDENER

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Q: I have a terrible whitefly problem in my southern exposure backyard . . . This problem has occurred two years in a row now. How do I get rid of this problem once and for all?

A: The most common species of whitefly on the Central Coast is the greenhouse whitefly. There are a number of other species as well, but they are of lesser prevalence. The greenhouse whitefly has a wide host range and can feed and reproduce on many vegetable and ornamental plants in Central Coast gardens. Therefore, once you have a whitefly infestation, the chances of getting rid of it “once and for all” are slim to none. I think the best you can hope for is to suppress the population and manage it as best you can.

Whiteflies have a tremendous capacity to reproduce. The developmental time varies with the whitefly species, host plant, and temperature. In general, when temperatures are warm, development from egg to reproducing adult can occur in less than three weeks. Considering that one gravid female can lay over one hundred eggs during her life time of two to three weeks, you can see how you might have a population explosion in a relatively short time, especially during the warm summer months. During the winter months the population declines to a point where individuals may be hard to find, but if you search carefully on such plants as fuchsia, poinsettia, rose, verbena, and any other evergreen that was an obvious host during the summer, you will find both nymphs and adults.

What to do? Whiteflies are strongly attracted to the color yellow. Some hardware, nursery and garden stores have what are called “Yellow-Sticky Cards.” This is a plastic card about the size of a postcard which is covered with a very sticky material. These cards can be hung among the infested plants to help reduce the whitefly population. The cards need to be checked periodically and replaced when they lose their stickiness! Summer oil and insecticidal soap, either in combination or separately, are effective whitefly suppression materials. These compounds are,

however, contact sprays. That means they only control or kill what they contact during application. Therefore, there is no residual effect, and good plant coverage is critical to control. Whiteflies (eggs, nymphs, and adults) live on the underside of leaves. Hence, the undersurface of leaves must be thoroughly wetted with spray material to “contact” and control the whiteflies present. A winter cleanup spray using a highly refined oil (summer oil) on your evergreen host plants would be useful to reduce overwintering adults and nymphs. Finally, there is a systemic insecticide available which provides excellent long-term whitefly control. The product is imidacloprid (chemical name). Look for this name in the “Active Ingredient” list at the bottom of the product label on the container. Imidacloprid is available at most garden stores as a ready-to-use product or as a concentrate (mix your own spray). Note: Use all plant protection products according to package label direction for best results. If you want more information about whiteflies on the Central Coast, contact **The Coastal Gardener, 624-A West Foster Road, Santa Maria, CA 93455.**