

# Spraying with Oil in Summer

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Horticultural oils—complex mixtures of petroleum hydrocarbons—have traditionally been used in the spring as dormant oils to control insect pests of woody ornamental landscape plants. It was believed that summer use of such oils would harm the plants.

Several oil-refining companies make many grades of horticultural oil, and they are labeled for different purposes and seasons of application. New research shows that new-generation oils can safely be used in the summer and on a great variety of plants.

In fact, horticultural oils can be applied anytime specific pests and diseases are identified in the garden, not just in the spring.

**The new oils are relatively non-toxic and safer to use** than most other products now available. In fact, oil in its purest form can literally be eaten by humans, with no damage.

Horticultural oils can be used safely and effectively to con-

trol a wide variety of garden pests: sucking insects such as aphids, leafhoppers and mealybugs; scale insects and the larva and egg stages of insects such as caterpillars, sawflies and leaf-feeding beetles.

The oils are not nearly as hazardous to beneficial garden predators such as ladybugs, nor do they interfere with naturally occurring parasites that also help control garden pests.

**The oils are not toxic to wildlife**, but should not be used near ponds or other areas that contain animals that breathe through their skin or gills.

Horticultural oils, when used and applied correctly, are so safe they can even be used on indoor plants.

Tender plants, including foliage plants and annuals, can be treated safely with the oils.

The oil can be sprayed on garden vegetables and fruits and will leave no residue; in fact, produce could be consumed just after spraying, with no harm to the consumer.

**The oils should not be applied on plants that are water-stressed.** Plants should be growing vigorously and show no signs of wilt before the soil is applied. Do not spray on flower blossoms; spotting may result. The oil is not as effective against pests in the adult stage. As in any sensible pest management program, the pest affecting the garden and its current life stage, should be identified before any control is used, including oil.

If the oil is used in a higher dosage than the label specifies, the plant could be harmed. And if used on conifers that have a bluish tint, such as the Colorado blue spruce or blue rug juniper, the color will be affected. The plant itself won't be harmed and new, unsprayed foliage will grow in the desired bluish tint.

**Nor should oils be used on the eastern black walnut**, which is harmed by them.

Another problem is that summer use of horticultural oils is a new-enough technique that only one company is now promoting summer spray oil: Safer Producers is the only source and sole distributor.

If gardeners check the label on other products, though, they may find others that can be used for spring and summer spraying, and other agricultural chemical companies are currently working on developing and labeling a summer oil.

—From *Nursery Notes*, May 1990  
Ohio Cooperative Extension Service  
Ohio State University

(Ed. Note: The above information is given for educational purposes. Reference to commercial products or trade names is made with the understanding that no discrimination is intended and no endorsement is implied.)

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