Mealybugs

Mealybugs are small, soft, wax-covered insects that are common problems on houseplants and on outdoor plants in areas with mild winters.

Usually found in groups or colonies, mealybugs suck plant sap and often produce sticky honeydew which can cover leaves. Manage mealybugs by purchasing pest-free plants, discarding infested plants, and relying on biological control outdoors.

What do mealybugs look like?

• Most adult mealybugs are wingless females with oval, segmented bodies covered with wax. Males have wings but are rarely seen.
• Newly hatched mealybug immatures (nymphs) lack wax and can move around plants but soon settle down and produce a waxy covering.
• Different mealybug species can be distinguished by the length of the waxy filaments around their bodies.
• They may be confused with cottony cushion scale, woolly aphids, soft scales, and whiteflies, which also produce wax and honeydew.
• Mealybugs are sometimes hard to see because they often live in protected areas of plants such as in the crown of a plant, in branch crotches, or on stems near the soil.

Signs and damage from mealybugs

• Signs of an infestation might include white, cottony egg masses on plants, wax-covered plants, sticky honeydew, black sooty mold growing on top of honeydew or ants feeding on honeydew.
• Mealybugs suck sap, weakening the plants. High populations can slow plant growth and cause leaf drop.
• Although many plants are attacked, citrus, grapes, bird of paradise, cactus, coral bells, cypress, fuchsia, hibiscus, mimosa and and many indoor plants are among the most commonly infested.

What about pesticides?

• The protective waxy cuticle of adult mealybugs and their tendency to hide makes contact insecticides less effective. However, insecticidal soaps, horticultural oils, and neem oil applied directly to immature mealybugs can reduce numbers.
• Other insecticides labeled for use against mealybugs can be harmful to beneficial insects and should be avoided in the garden.

What you do in your home and landscape affects our water and health.

• Minimize the use of pesticides that pollute our waterways and harm human health.
• Use nonchemical alternatives or less toxic pesticide products whenever possible.
• Read product labels carefully and follow instructions on proper use, storage, and disposal.

For more information about managing pests, visit ipm.ucanr.edu or your local University of California Cooperative Extension office.