

# Pest Busters #1 - Introduction

Welcome to the first edition of **Pest Busters**.

So many people get freaked out when they see a critter or bug nibbling on their plants. There really is no need to panic.

The first thing you need to do is identify the pest that is doing the damage. Sometimes this is hard to figure out. You will need to look the plant over carefully. Sometimes the pests stay under the leaves or bury themselves in the stems. Sometimes it's not a bug, but a larger animal like a rabbit nibbling on tender new growth. Sometimes the damage occurs at dawn, dusk or at night, so you may find yourself out stalking your pray with a flashlight. The reason it's so important to figure out what is causing the damage, is because you want to be able to apply the pest control that is most likely going to work. What is the point of spraying something if you don't know if it's going to work, right?

In many cases, a sharp spray of water is all you need to remove the pest that is eating your plant. That is what I suggest you do first. Handpicking them and dunking them in soapy hot water is another very effective method. I can't tell you how satisfying this can be, especially with japanese beetles.

So why do pests attack plants? It could be because you have forced nice tender shoots for them to munch on by over fertilizing. High nitrogen fertilizers force lush green growth on your plants, but at what consequence? Your plants will grow just fine with compost. They may grow a little more slowly, but that means less tender new growth to attract critters.

Many pests attack plants that are already stressed. They could be stressed due to lack of water or because the soil does not have the proper nutrients or organic matter, or maybe it's not planted in the right location (too much light or not the right type of soil). You can solve a lot of problems by adding compost to your soil every year. It's very simple to do. Once a year cover the soil with a 1" layer of compost and work it in lightly with a rake. You can add mulch on top of that to make it look more finished, but as my gardens fill out more, you see less of the exposed soil and mulch, so I find I use less mulch as the years go by.

A healthy soil is full of micro-organisms that help defend your plants from all kinds of pests and diseases and adding organic matter in the form of compost is the best way to encourage their growth and well-being. Well made compost also contains all the nutrients most plants need to survive and grow well. The key is that the nutrients in organic fertilizers and compost are released slowly and don't cause spikes in the plant's growth.

Other ways to add organic matter include using an organic mulch like shredded leaves, untreated grass clippings or shredded pine or cedar. As the mulch breaks down, it adds nutrients to the soil. Using several layers of black/white newspaper under your mulch will help your mulch to work better. The paper blocks the sun so weed seeds can't germinate. You can also use less mulch this way. As the paper breaks down, it attracts earthworms, which is very beneficial to your soil. Worms aerate the soil and also leave castings which enrich the soil. You would need to put down newspaper every year or two depending on

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your climate, but that is a small price to pay for nearly a season's worth of not having to weed the gardens. You are recycling and adding organic matter at the same time....can't get better than that.

Proper watering is also essential for creating healthy plants. It is usually much more beneficial to plants and grasses if they are watered less frequently, but with more water at those times. This ensures that the water goes down deep into the soil. When the top few inches of the soil begin to dry out, the roots of your plants will grow down deeper into the soil to reach for water. A strong healthy root system means that your plants can withstand drought conditions for longer periods of time. If you water 20 minutes every day, that means the top layer of soil will always be wet and the roots of your plants never need to go below that to find water. Then all of a sudden, you don't water for a day or two. What are the plants to do? They are so used to finding water readily at the surface, that they have not grown long roots that go deep into the soil surface and therefore become stressed and susceptible to pest attacks and could even die.

Now there is always an exception to this rule. Some plants just don't grow roots real deep in the soil, such as lettuce or astilbe, so it's important to educate yourself on the kind of plants that you have and the conditions they prefer, but in general it's much better to water for 1-2 hours once or twice a week than to water every day for 20 minutes each time.

So now you know what it takes to keep plants healthy and less attractive to pests. Thought it was going to be more difficult than that? Well it's not. Simple is usually better (my new philosophy).

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