

APHIDS ON HANGING BASKETS

Every year, we get calls about aphids. This time of year, when greenhouse life is crazy, it's easy to let things slip by, but one thing to keep on your radar in the coming weeks is pest management.

Oftentimes, we transplant plugs and liners into baskets, set them on benches or floors for a little while to root-in, hang them up on basket lines ... and forget about them. When HBs are out of your direct line of sight, it's much easier to accidentally skip them during your weekly pest scouting routine.



Forgetting to check your baskets for pests can quickly lead to compromised crop quality and problems raining down on your crops on the benches below. While this week's tip focuses on aphid pressure in HBs, keep in mind that other pests like thrips, spider mites and broad mites can also get into your basket crops and wreak havoc if they go unchecked. Let's take a look at some strategies for scouting and controlling aphids in your basket crops.

Scouting. It's easier to take a glance at your yellow/blue sticky cards when they're at a normal working level, but these are still great tools to use up high in your baskets. On the bench, common practice is to place one sticky card for every 500 to 1000 ft² of growing area, but that doesn't make much sense in a single-file line of HBs.

- Place about three sticky cards per basket line; one toward each end and another somewhere in the middle. This will give you a good idea of what pest distribution looks like in your HBs.
- Hang a flag from baskets that you are monitoring. This will make it much easier to find where your sticky cards are and keep you from having to hunt around for them, especially when crops develop and start spilling over the HB sides.

- Know your “aphid magnet” crops and scout these more rigorously. Aphids seem to love calibrachoa and verbena, so keep an especially close eye on monoculture baskets or combos with either of these components.

Deploying Biologicals. Since applying pesticides to HBs up on their hangers can be challenging, consider implementing proactive IPM using predators and parasitoids of aphids in your hanging crops. Ask your biosolutions supplier which BCAs they recommend for aphids in your specific situation, but here are a couple that have proven effective.

- *Aphidius ervi* is a parasitic wasp that preys upon aphids and is generally more effective at controlling large aphid species, like foxglove- or potato aphids.
- *Aphidius colemani* is another parasitic wasp that preys upon smaller aphid species, such as green peach and cotton aphids.

These will be most effective when deployed early in the crop cycle before aphid pressure can gain a foothold. As with pretty much all predatory and parasitic biologicals, new batches need to be continually released into your crop to ensure the beneficial insect population is reinvigorated and outnumbers the target pests.

Insecticide Use & Preventative Control. If a tightly managed biocontrol program isn’t enough to keep up with explosions of aphid pressure in your baskets, you may want to consider breaking out the big guns and applying an insecticide that will provide systemic and longer-term control. This gives you somewhat of an insurance policy against sudden spikes in pest populations ... especially if they appear in large numbers unexpectedly from outdoors.

Try to exhaust all other IPM measures before resorting to the use of systemic insecticides. However, if you experience significant losses due to aphid and other insect pest damage, treating baskets with a systemic insecticide shortly after transplant can be a very effective strategy to keep problem-pest populations from reaching a critical mass.

While the use of systemic insecticides is a contentious topic, preventative control of pests using systemics early in the season when plants are vegetative and non-target insects are not present can greatly reduce potential risks. Always follow label regulations when applying insecticides and be sure you understand your customers’ expectations when it comes to use of different IPM products like systemics before treating your crops.