Other Common Orchid Pests

By Dr Fred

Spring is a high risk time for chewing insects which can do a lot of damage before they are detected. An effective and low risk strategy is to spray regularly during this time with Eco-oil as a preventative and Confidor to kill emerging insects.

The little, colourful (yellow with dark markings) Dendrobium beetle attacks many types of orchids in spring and prefers the flowers and new shoots of a plant, including flower spikes. It is common in our area, quite elusive and tends to drop out of sight as soon as touched. The eggs are laid in the canes and often chew through them to get out. Cut off the affected cane and treat the plant with a systemic insecticide.

Thrips often show up as distortion of the new growths and are usually followed by ants which feed on their excretions.

Aphids can stunt flower growth but respond to oils and household insecticides.

Snails are a constant problem and do most damage at night. Commercial snail baits are safe to use in orchid pots if kept away from children and animals. Tiny garlic snails are common, difficult to see in potting mix and have a predeliction for eating tender new roots. Any plant with this type of damage should be treated with snail baits or powder in the usual way but they seem to be less effective for garlic snails. If you suspect them, a few slices of apple or lettuce on the surface of the mix act as a magnet for young snails which can then be removed.

Caterpillars often hide under leaves, but leave tell-tale “bites” and pellets of fras. They seem to prefer flowers and can ruin a display within hours. Individuals can be removed manually, but infestations are best treated with Dipel, a safe biological control. Household and other common insecticides such as Malathion also work. Try to keep butterflies and moths out of the shade-house.

Mice and cockroaches can do a lot of anonymous damage at night but specific treatments can be used at first suspicion. Strangely, I have not heard of problems with possums but would be interested to hear of your experience.

Ants cultivate many pests for food and are most effectively dealt with by eradicating the thrips or other sucking insects that attracted them in the first place.

Spider mites thrive on the underside of leaves during long hot dry periods. They are visible only with a hand lens but give the leaf a dry, brittle, silvery sheen due to their webs. There are a number of varieties, but all are very difficult to eradicate with miticides once established and all effective miticides (eg Kelthane, Rogor) are quite toxic. To discourage mites, spray water under the leaves regularly or otherwise increase the humidity especially in warm, dry periods.

Rots often appear centrally in new shoots which pull out easily. These soil fungi are encouraged by poor air movement, cool temperatures, poor drainage and over-watering. Allow the plant to dry out, treat with a fungicide and repot. Miniature cymbidiums seem particularly prone to this.

Crown rot particularly affects phalaenopsis and can be prevented by ensuring that the crown of the plant is dry after watering, especially in winter. Use a tissue to soak up any water that remains in the plants' crown.

Brown soggy leaf spots can be bacterial (often pseudomonas) and require treatment with bactericidal solutions or dilute methylated spirits after surgery to excise the diseased tissue. This is highly infectious and rapid spread from plant to plant is common. Cattleyas and Phalaenopsis are prone to pseudomonas. Do not allow water condensation to drop from the ceiling onto your plants especially in cold weather.

Black spots on flowers are due to a Botrytis fungus. Remove affected flowers, increase air movement, reduce humidity and raise evening temperatures.

Weeds. If you grow ferns to help keep the humidity high, expect they will colonise your orchids. I usually prick out the desirable ferns and grow them on. Professional orchid growers and those with large collections use a selective herbicide spray which does not seem to harm the common orchid species. I am told that Alafox (Lisinceron 450 g/l) can be sprayed quite heavily onto the weeds around orchid roots at a dilution of 2ml/l with good results.

This list of common problems is not exhaustive. Constant vigilance and follow-up treatments are often required.

Are there any good bugs?

A novel approach to insect control is bio-control. This includes the use of insectivorous plants such as pitcher plants and encouraging harmless predators such as preying mantids, spiders, predator mites, bacteria, and (most) ladybeetles to reduce the use of insecticides. Unfortunately the good bugs are also killed by insecticides. They will eventually reach equilibrium with the pests (otherwise they die out).

For more information see the American Orchid Society website www.orchidweb.org