

Small bugs suck holes through your garden plants' leaves

- By Gretchen Voyle For MediaNews Group



Four-lined plant bug (*Poeciloscopus lineatus*) photographed in London, Ontario, Canada. These bugs lay their eggs in fall and the tiny babies suck juices out of your plants in the spring. (Ryan

Hodnett CC BY-SA)

Ryan Hodnett

Q: I have damage to quite a few plants in my garden. There are small, discolored and round spots on the leaves. On some plants, they are light tan and other plants, they are dark brown. The centers have fallen out of some of these, leaving holes. Some of the holes overlap. Is this an insect or a disease? I have lots of spots on my chrysanthemums and mint plants. I thought nothing bothered these plants.

A: Unless the plants are plastic or concrete, there is always something out there to cause damage.

Your insects are called four-lined plant bugs, and they suck the delicious goodness out of the leaves, creating round spots. They damage the leaves on a variety of plants, often ones with spicy scents like herbs and mints, chrysanthemums, basil and zinnias. They also damage morning glory, coreopsis, dahlias and lettuce.

But wait, there's more. They feed on shrubs and trees like dogwood, forsythia, honeysuckle, hydrangea, viburnum and weigela.

This is what is described as a true bug because it feeds by piercing and sucking rather than chewing. The adults are about a half-inch long and are tennis-ball yellow-green with four black stripes running from front to back. But as children or nymphs, they are bright red or yellow. It is hard to find them because they feed under the leaves on young tender foliage at the tips of stems. When disturbed, they race away on the stems in a downward spiral to the ground. That's why you find the damage, not the culprits.

The one-sixteenth inch spots have had the material between the top and the bottom of the leaf sucked out, leaving translucent windows of light tan to black, depending on the plant. This can cause curling and distortion to new, small leaves. The spots often dry up and fall out, leaving what is called shot-holes.

Feeding lasts about a month beginning in early May. They mate and the female lays her eggs in woody stems of perennials. She makes a slit and deposits one to six eggs that will hatch next spring. This is why it's a good plan to cut out dead stems in March and barbeque them in your burn barrel. It's not necessary to remove them in the fall because the stems act like little snow fences and keep snow in the bed, protecting roots.

But in March, eggs have not hatched and they can be removed. Insecticidal soap will kill the small nymphs, if you find them and can hit them with the spray. It is a contact product. The adults need a tougher insecticide like cyfluthrin or carbaryl.

Make sure your insecticide can be sprayed on edible plants, if you have herbs being damaged. Or trim back the herbs once the damaged has ceased and let them grow new leaves.

Q: Lately, I've been seeing the same interesting shrub in quite a few yards near me. I first thought it had white and pink flowers at the ends of the branches, but now, I realize that it has green and white leaves with bits of pink mixed in. The leaves are kind of narrow and it seems to grow pretty fast. I see various sizes from little to probably 10 feet tall. Can you give me a guess of what it might be because I would like to buy one?

A: Your description sounds like a dappled willow, with the botanical name of *Salix integra* "Hakuro-nikishi." This, like other members of the willow family, are fast growing with relatively soft wood. They prefer soil that does not dry out totally so it is important to water them if you are not getting regular rain. They grow well in damp areas. These natives of Japan are deer resistant, which is always good news. Dappled willows grow to 15 to 20 feet tall and can be maintained by pruning at six feet tall. Just don't try to prune them to dinky sizes and expect them to live long, happy lives. It is important to remove the biggest, heaviest wood periodically because this is the wood that will get borers and cankers. Dappled willows can handle a soil pH of 5.6 to 7.8 which is a huge span. Prune them in late winter or early spring and be sure to remove any dead wood if it is present. These guys are not for small yards but are exceptionally showy.