Bugs are Back  
By Jane Morse, University of Florida/IFAS, Manatee County Extension Agent

Ahh, the weather is just picture perfect and plants are coming out of their winter dormancy. The pruning, fertilizing and watering that was done is making those plants spurt out new growth and this is making the bugs very happy.

Scale insects are the most serious pests of many ornamental plants. These insects cause damage by sucking the fluid out of the leaves, stems and sometimes roots of plants. Some feed on the undersides of leaves and cause small yellow spots to occur. Plants under major attack look unhealthy and don’t produce much new growth. There can be lots of yellowing leaves, dropping of leaves, branch dieback and plant death.

There are three types of scale insects: armored, soft and mealybugs. Armored scales secrete a waxy covering over their bodies that is not attached to the body. The scale lives and feeds under this wax cover. Soft scales also secrete a waxy covering, but it is attached to their bodies. Mealybugs are soft-bodied and are usually covered with a cottony-looking substance.

Soft scales and mealybugs excrete large amounts of a sugary substance called honeydew. This honeydew provides the perfect growing media for a black fungus called sooty mold. If you see black sooty-looking material covering the leaves of your plant and it can be removed by rubbing it with your fingers, then you probably have a pest insect infestation.

Sooty mold mainly looks bad. It also tells you that you have a bug problem. Once the bug problem is taken care of, the sooty mold will eventually weather away. It is important to check plants for pest insects weekly throughout the year and especially during times of rapid growth. Look at the undersides of the leaves using a magnifying glass or bring a sample to the Extension Office.
Maintenance control measures: If only a few scales are found, prune off the infested branch or leaves. Since scales thrive in warm, moist conditions, increase air flow or thin plants in the area to decrease moisture. Avoid over-fertilizing. It is best to use slow-release fertilizers and only if needed. If the same plant keeps getting infested, it is probably a plant out of place, or it receives improper care. Check to see what conditions the plant prefers and be sure to provide it with those conditions.

Biological control measures: There are many beneficial insects which actually eat pest insects. Some you are probably familiar with are the lady beetles, green lacewings and spiders. There are many more helpful bugs such as the assassin bug, syrphid fly, big-eyed bug, ground beetle, dragonfly, trash bug, earwig, long-legged fly, etc. Usually, if we give them time, they will come in and eat the pest insects. It is important to preserve these natural enemies. Using horticultural oils or insecticidal soaps helps to preserve these good insects.

Chemical control measures: Timing is very important. The insect stage that you want to target is the nymph. This stage is just after the egg hatches; they are called “crawlers”. Eggs generally hatch in 1 to 3 weeks. Be sure to read and follow label directions for all pesticides and take proper precautions. Use long-lasting chemical pesticides only when all other measures have failed.

For more information on growing plants in Florida, call your local Master Gardeners at the Manatee County Extension Service (an “extension” of the University of Florida). Master Gardeners are available Monday-Friday from 9 AM to 4 PM and can be reached by calling 722-4524.