

Leafhoppers

Introduction

Leafhoppers are not common pests in greenhouses, but can occasionally enter greenhouses from outdoor crops, (especially herbaceous perennials) and be seen on yellow sticky cards. On outdoor growing crops of herbaceous perennials, woody ornamentals and cut flowers, leafhoppers can be difficult to control pests. Of the over 2500 species of leafhoppers found in North America; three are especially troublesome: the potato leafhopper, the aster leafhopper and mint leafhopper.

Feeding Damage

Leafhoppers with their sucking mouthparts, feed on plant sap. Some species only feed on the upper layers of plant cells causing white flecking on plant leaves.



Figure 1: Leafhopper feeding damage on salvia. Photos by L. Pundt

Other species, such as potato leafhopper, injure the plant’s vascular system, resulting in a “hopperburn” type of damage beginning at the leaf tip with distortion, yellowing stunting and loss of plant vigor.

Life Cycle and Biology

Leafhoppers are small, (about 1/8 to 3/16 of an inch in length) with slender wedge-shaped bodies that taper at their end. Eggs are inserted into plant leaves, often near the leaf veins, and hatch into active, nymphs found on the underside of the leaves. Adults hold their wings roof like over their body.



Figure 2: Wedge-shaped leafhopper adult on *Baptisia* leaf and on sticky card. Photos by L. Pundt

Potato leafhopper

Potato leafhopper is found primarily in eastern North America. Feeding causes leaves to develop yellow and brown margins; growth may become stunted known as 'hopperburn,' and is sometimes mistaken for fertilizer (or high soluble salts) injury, drought, or herbicide damage. Look for the pale green nymphs with their characteristic crab-like walk especially on *Alcea*, *Astilbe*, *Baptisia*, *Dahlia*, *Gaura*, *Hibiscus*, *Lupinus*, and *Nepeta*.



Figure 3: Hopperburn on *Lupine* and *Hibiscus*. Photos by L. Pundt

The very active leafhoppers dart around and fly up from foliage when disturbed so yellow sticky cards are helpful. Using yellow sticky cards also makes it easier to determine which species of leafhopper is present. Potato leafhopper adults are approximately 1/8-inch long, light green with characteristic white spots just behind their head that are visible under high magnification. This species overwinters only in the warmer parts of the southeastern US. Each

year, it migrates northward. Generally, two to three generations in Connecticut each year. Consult your local Extension Vegetable Crops “Pest Messages” to learn when leafhoppers arrive and establish infestations in commercial bean or potato fields. You know then to start looking for leafhoppers on ornamentals.

Aster Leafhopper

Adult aster leafhoppers are about 1/8 inch long and yellow-green with black spots just behind the head. Use sticky cards to trap adults in order to see the distinguishing spots behind the head.



Figure 4: Aster Leafhopper Adult. Photo by L. Pundt

Aster leafhoppers overwinter as an egg on various grasses and perennials. In southern Ontario, there can be up to five generations during the growing season. Aster leafhoppers transmit the pathogen that causes aster yellows disease, especially those insects migrating in from southern states.

Aster yellows may be found on herbaceous perennials, annuals, cut flowers, vegetables and weeds. Members of the aster family (*Aster*, *Coreopsis* and *Echinacea*) are commonly affected. When plants are infected early in the season, they become stunted, with shortened internodes and deformed yellowish-green flower heads. Severely infected plants develop a bushy mass of leaves (known as a “witches’ broom”) with no normal flower production. Plants infected cannot be cured. Manage weeds in and around production areas to prevent infection of alternative hosts and overwintering of aster yellows.

Sage leafhopper

Sage (also known as mint) leafhopper prefers herbs in the mint family such as rosemary, sage, catnip, spearmint, lavender and oregano. Native to Europe, this insect is now established in the US and has been a pest both outdoors and in greenhouses. Adults are small (slightly larger than 1/8") and pale with distinctive brownish oval markings. Feeding damage may be confused with leaf injury caused by thrips, lace bugs or spider mites. Young leaves may become distorted.



Figure 5: Leafhopper feeding damage on rosemary. Photo by L. Pundt

Scouting

Look for the fast moving adults and nymphs on the underside of leaves. Their feeding causes a stippling of the foliage (resembling spider mite feeding), stunting, and distortion of new growth. Potato leafhopper also injects a toxin as it feeds, so that leaves develop a v-shaped, brown edge burn at the tip known as “hopperburn” that may be mistaken for leaf scorch due to drought stress. One may also see their shed, white skins. Yellow sticky cards can be helpful in trapping the fast moving adults in order to distinguish the species.

Biological Controls

There are limited natural enemies commercially available for the management of the fast moving leafhoppers.

Insecticides

Control of leafhoppers with contact insecticides is difficult because they are very mobile, and new leafhoppers enter treated areas after sprays have dried. Systemic insecticides may be applied to ornamental plants to prevent feeding damage when leafhoppers first appear. See the latest edition of *New England Greenhouse Floriculture Guide* available from [Northeast Greenhouse Conference and Expo](#) for more information.

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