



UC Marin Master Gardeners
Telephone: 415/473-4204
Website: <http://www.marinmg.org>

Advice to Grow By ... Ask Us!

GARDEN GOOD GUYS – PATIENCE

By Nanette Londeree, Marin Master Gardener

April showers often bring a lot more than May flowers. Along with the wonderful bounty of spring in the garden come some of the irksome challenges. The remarkable amount of new growth that most plants put out at this time of the year provides just the right environment for a few of the unwanted harbingers of spring. Depending on weather and other growing conditions, these may be enough to make you get out your shovel and turn your flower and vegetable beds into dry rock gardens.

The spring show begins with those foamy little pillows around the stems of new growth on a wide variety of plants – it's the spittlebugs. Spittlebugs, or froghoppers, are easily identified by the frothy, white foam that protect the nymphs from predators. They hatch in mid-spring and remain hidden in the bubbly spittle for six to seven weeks when the winged adults emerge.

Next in the lineup are the really unappetizing beasties – aphids. These unsightly, prolific pests don't do too much damage and generally don't spread disease, but are offensive because they look bad, they attract ants, and their production of honeydew can create a great environment for sooty mold. They favor that succulent new growth that fills the garden in spring, especially buds and shoots, and their population's boom as a result. And usually, so do the trails of ants that work diligently to protect their aphid friends.

Have you seen big holes chewed in your leaves, or even leaf skeletons? Maybe half the bud on a new flower completely gone? If you look closely, more than likely you'll see a plump, green caterpillar eating its way through the delectable plants. And probably the worst of these spring nuisances are the polka-dotted leaves punctuated with bright orange spots that are turning bright yellow and falling off your rose plants as if it were fall. Cool temperatures along with some rainy days bring about lots of blackspot and rust, diseases that can easily defoliate a plant in a matter of days.

So, what's a gardener to do? Be patient! For most, during the winter and early spring, this comes naturally – we put the puny bundle of sticks, the plump, naked little bulb or nearly invisible seed in the ground knowing that within a few months they'll be transformed into glorious growing machines. We anxiously watch as the new growth emerges from the barren stems, the earth parts as the tip of a bulb reaches for the light, or those first pair of leaves are replaced with the real thing. But sometimes, when it comes to the frustrations of spring pests, we often lose that ability to just wait it out. Heed the French proverb - "Patience is bitter but its fruit is sweet." The spring maladies are certainly bitter, but those eminent flowers, fruits and vegetables are really worth it. The spittlebugs will disappear as they transition to adults and if you find them unsightly, just hose them off. A similar treatment works with aphids, and hopefully with some good beneficial bugs in the garden (like ladybugs, soldier beetles and syrphid flies) and a little time, their population will also slow down or disappear. The caterpillars, if not food for the birds, will go onto their next stage of life, and be transformed into beautiful butterflies to grace your garden with their delightful flutter. And the horrible blackspot and rust will generally disappear as we transition into our seasonal dry period.

There's no doubt that these maladies are frustrating, and you can certainly reach for the insecticide or fungicide that will minimize or eliminate these nuisances. But if you do nothing, and are patient, they will most often take care of themselves. Your plants will put out lots of new growth - whatever was damaged is history. And it's a lot gentler to Mother Earth.

So consider the wisdom of Horace (65 – 8 BC), "What may not be altered is made lighter by patience" and sit back, relax, and enjoy your spring bounty!