

Spider Mite

How to identify damage: Spider mites destroy the chlorophyll-containing cells along the surface of the needle or scale of the evergreen. As a result, the needles of the affected plant will have a stippled look with flecks of yellow irregularly interspersed with the normal green. A severe infestation leads to coalescing of the yellow flecks so that the entire foliage will be first yellow, then brown. If a white piece of paper is placed under the affected area and the plant is shaken vigorously, the mites will appear on the paper as moving dots about the size of the period at the end of this sentence. A few are of little consequence, but dozens appearing may be cause for concern.

Life cycle: Spruce spider mites over-winter as eggs hidden under bud scales on the needles or under webbing along the stem or branches. The mites hatch in the spring beginning about the first of April. They develop rapidly from larvae to nymphs to adults in about 6 days. The adults are about 0.5 mm long and grayish black. Three or more generations are produced every year with the last generation producing over-wintering eggs from September to November. Mites are dispersed by the wind.

Critical control time: Most damage from spruce spider mites occurs when they are most active from late March through June, and September through November. Hot, dry weather causes a diminution of their activity; however, the summer weather accentuated the damage they have done to host plants. Frequently, when damage is noticed on plants in the summer, the mites are no longer actively causing harm.

Control strategies: Monitoring is the key to controlling this pest. Know the damage this pest will cause and look for it during the times of the year when it is most active. Stippling of the needles on more than 10% of the foliage may require intervention with horticultural oils or soaps. Heavily infested shrubs should be sprayed with horticultural oil during the over-wintering period. Additionally, spider mites have many natural predators, and haphazardly spraying pesticides can actually cause increases in the mite population.

