

Houseplant gnats

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In winter and late spring, fungus gnats are often noticed flying near foliage plants and windows. Fungus gnats cause little or no injury to plants but create a serious nuisance problem. Since these insects develop in potting soil, virtually any live container plant can be a host for fungus gnats.

The adult insect is a slender 1/8 inch long, grayish to black with one pair of clear wings. Fungus gnat larvae are whitish with black shiny heads and live in moist, organically rich soil. Adults live for a few days and lay eggs in soil cracks and around the base of plants. The pale colored larval ("maggot") stage feeds on fungi and decaying organic matter. They also feed on root hairs of the plant which causes reduced plant vigor. A generation can be completed in one month.

Management: Fungus gnats are native insects and are common in lawns and garden soils. Reinfestation from these outdoor sources is very likely in homes and offices and difficult to prevent completely. However, fungus gnat populations can be reduced to levels that are not a serious nuisance. Since fungus gnat larvae feed primarily on decaying plant materials, changing soil moisture conditions is the most important step to take. Watering should be limited so that the soil surface can dry between waterings.

Some adults can be captured on sticky cards. However, as they are very short lived they may have laid many eggs before capture. Adults can also be suppressed by sprays of pyrethrins and pyrethroid insecticides. However frequent application is required to reduce adult abundance and egg laying, particularly when using insecticides of short persistence.

Larval control is more effective. The biological insecticide *Bacillus thuringiensis* var. *israelensis* or (H-14 strain) is highly effective as a soil drench. Also some neem products are labeled for soil drench purposes and can control fungus gnat larvae. Unfortunately neither of these products is commonly sold in Colorado and may be more readily acquired via mail order.