

# How to Get Rid of Whiteflies on Plants in Florida

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If you live in Palm Beach, Broward, Martin, or St. Lucie counties, you know that Florida's subtropical climate is a paradise for lush, beautiful landscaping. Unfortunately, this warm, humid environment is also a haven for pests. One of the most notorious and destructive invaders in South Florida gardens is the whitefly. These tiny, moth-like insects can quickly turn a thriving hedge or a prized ornamental plant into a sickly, defoliated mess. If you have noticed tiny white insects fluttering around your plants when you brush past them, or if your leaves are covered in a sticky, black substance, you are likely dealing with a whitefly infestation.

Understanding how to identify, treat, and prevent whiteflies is essential for maintaining a healthy landscape in Florida. This comprehensive guide will walk you through everything you need to know about getting rid of whiteflies on plants, from recognizing the early signs of damage to implementing effective, long-term control strategies. We will also cover the infamous ficus whitefly crisis that has plagued South Florida and discuss when it is time to call in the professionals.

## Identifying Whiteflies and the Damage They Cause

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Before you can effectively treat a pest problem, you must properly identify the culprit. Whiteflies are not actually flies; they are more closely related to aphids and scale insects. Adult whiteflies are tiny, measuring about  $\frac{1}{16}$  to  $\frac{1}{12}$  of an inch long, with yellowish bodies and white, powdery wings. They typically congregate on the undersides of leaves, where they lay their eggs and feed on the plant's sap.

### The Life Cycle of a Whitefly

Whiteflies undergo a rapid life cycle, especially in the warm, humid conditions of South Florida. A female whitefly can lay hundreds of eggs on the underside of a leaf. These eggs hatch into nymphs, or "crawlers," which move a short distance before settling down to feed. Once settled, they lose their legs and resemble tiny, flat, oval

scales. They remain in this stationary feeding stage until they emerge as winged adults. In Florida's climate, this entire cycle can be completed in just a few weeks, allowing populations to explode rapidly.

## Signs of a Whitefly Infestation

The most obvious sign of a whitefly infestation is the visible presence of the adults. If you shake or brush against an infested plant, a cloud of tiny white insects will fly up, only to quickly settle back down on the leaves. However, the adults are only part of the problem. The nymphs do the majority of the feeding, and their presence is often accompanied by several telltale signs:

**Honeydew Production:** As whiteflies feed on plant sap, they excrete a sticky, sugary substance called honeydew. This honeydew coats the leaves and anything beneath the infested plant, including sidewalks, patio furniture, and cars.

**Sooty Mold:** The honeydew provides an ideal growing medium for a black fungus known as sooty mold. While sooty mold does not directly infect the plant, a thick layer of it can block sunlight, interfering with photosynthesis and weakening the plant further.

**Leaf Damage:** Heavy feeding by whiteflies causes leaves to turn yellow, wilt, and eventually drop off. In severe cases, an infestation can completely defoliate a plant, leading to branch dieback and even the death of the plant.

## Common Florida Host Plants

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While whiteflies can attack a wide variety of plants, certain species in Florida are particularly susceptible. Being aware of these common host plants can help you monitor your landscape more effectively.

**Ficus:** Ficus hedges and trees are arguably the most famous victims of whiteflies in South Florida. The weeping fig (*Ficus benjamina*) is highly susceptible, and entire hedges can be defoliated in a matter of weeks if left untreated.

**Hibiscus:** The vibrant hibiscus is a staple in Florida gardens, but it is also a favorite target for several species of whiteflies, including the giant whitefly and the silverleaf whitefly.

**Gardenias:** Known for their intoxicating fragrance, gardenias are often plagued by whiteflies, which can quickly cover the glossy green leaves in sticky honeydew and black sooty mold.

**Palms:** Several species of palms, including the coconut palm and the areca palm, can fall victim to specific types of whiteflies, such as the rugose spiraling whitefly.

**Citrus:** Florida's iconic citrus trees are not immune to whiteflies. The citrus whitefly can cause significant damage to the foliage and reduce fruit yield.

## The Ficus Whitefly Crisis in South Florida

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No discussion of whiteflies in Florida would be complete without addressing the ficus whitefly (*Singhiella simplex*). First identified in Miami-Dade County in 2007, this invasive pest quickly spread throughout South Florida, causing widespread devastation to ficus hedges and trees.

The ficus whitefly specifically targets plants in the genus *Ficus*. Because ficus hedges are incredibly popular in South Florida for privacy and landscaping, the rapid spread of this pest created a crisis. Homeowners watched helplessly as their dense, green hedges rapidly turned yellow, dropped their leaves, and died.

The impact of the ficus whitefly highlighted the importance of proactive pest management. It taught Florida homeowners that relying on a single plant species for extensive landscaping (monoculture) can be risky when a specific pest is introduced. While the initial wave of devastation has passed, the ficus whitefly remains a persistent threat in Palm Beach, Broward, Martin, and St. Lucie counties, requiring ongoing vigilance and treatment.

## Practical DIY Steps for Whitefly Control

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If you catch a whitefly infestation early, there are several practical, do-it-yourself steps you can take to manage the population before it spirals out of control. These methods are most effective for minor infestations on smaller plants.

## **Water Blasting**

One of the simplest and most immediate ways to reduce a whitefly population is to use a strong stream of water from your garden hose. Blasting the undersides of the leaves will dislodge adults, nymphs, and eggs. This method is particularly effective because many of the dislodged nymphs will not be able to crawl back onto the plant before they die. You will need to repeat this process every few days to keep the population in check.

## **Pruning and Sanitation**

If the infestation is localized to specific branches or leaves, prune them off and dispose of them immediately. Do not place infested clippings in your compost pile, as the whiteflies may survive and spread. Instead, seal the clippings in a plastic bag and put them in the trash. Maintaining good sanitation in your garden by removing fallen leaves and debris can also help reduce hiding places for pests.

## **Yellow Sticky Traps**

Whiteflies are attracted to the color yellow. You can purchase yellow sticky traps at most garden centers and hang them near your susceptible plants. While these traps will not eliminate an infestation on their own, they are an excellent monitoring tool. By checking the traps regularly, you can gauge the size of the whitefly population and determine if further treatment is necessary.

## **Chemical and Natural Treatments for Homeowners**

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When water blasting and pruning are not enough, you may need to turn to insecticidal treatments. For Florida homeowners, it is crucial to choose products that are effective against whiteflies but safe for the environment, especially considering the state's sandy soil and the potential for runoff into waterways.

### **Insecticidal Soaps and Horticultural Oils**

Insecticidal soaps and horticultural oils, such as neem oil, are excellent first-line treatments for whiteflies. These products work by suffocating the insects on contact.

**Neem Oil:** Derived from the seeds of the neem tree, neem oil is a natural, broad-spectrum insecticide. It not only suffocates the whiteflies but also disrupts their feeding and reproductive cycles. When applying neem oil, it is critical to thoroughly coat the undersides of the leaves where the whiteflies congregate.

**Application Tips:** Because these products only kill on contact, they must be applied thoroughly and repeatedly. In Florida's hot climate, it is essential to apply oils and soaps in the early morning or late evening. Applying them during the heat of the day can cause the oil to magnify the sun's rays, leading to severe leaf burn.

## Encouraging Natural Predators

One of the most sustainable ways to manage whiteflies in your Florida landscape is to encourage their natural enemies. Biological control is a key component of Integrated Pest Management (IPM), a strategy heavily endorsed by the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS).

Several beneficial insects prey on whiteflies, including:

**Ladybugs:** Both adult ladybugs and their larvae are voracious predators of whitefly eggs and nymphs. **Lacewings:** Green lacewing larvae, often called "aphid lions," will happily consume whiteflies. **Parasitic Wasps:** Tiny, stingless wasps, such as those in the genus *Encarsia*, lay their eggs inside whitefly nymphs. When the wasp larva hatches, it consumes the whitefly from the inside out.

You can encourage these beneficial insects by planting a diverse array of flowering plants that provide nectar and pollen. Additionally, avoiding the use of broad-spectrum, contact insecticides will help protect these natural predators. If you spray harsh chemicals to kill the whiteflies, you will likely kill their predators as well, which can lead to an even worse infestation later on.

## Systemic Root Drench Treatments for Long-Term Control

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For severe infestations, large trees, or extensive hedges (like a ficus hedge), topical sprays are often impractical and ineffective. In these situations, systemic insecticides are the most reliable solution.

Systemic insecticides are applied to the soil around the base of the plant, usually as a root drench or granular application. The plant absorbs the active ingredient through its roots and distributes it throughout its vascular system. When the whiteflies feed on the sap of the treated plant, they ingest the insecticide and die.

## Advantages of Systemic Treatments

**Long-Lasting:** Systemic treatments can provide protection for several months, making them ideal for long-term control in Florida's year-round growing season. **Thorough Coverage:** Because the insecticide is inside the plant, it reaches every leaf, including the hard-to-reach undersides and the very top canopy of tall trees. **Safer for Beneficial Insects:** Since the insecticide is contained within the plant, it poses less risk to beneficial insects that do not feed on the plant's sap, such as ladybugs and bees (though care must still be taken when treating flowering plants).

## Application Considerations for Florida

When using systemic insecticides in Florida, it is important to follow the product label meticulously. Florida's sandy soils drain quickly, and heavy rains during the wet season can wash the product away before the plant has a chance to absorb it. Furthermore, local water restrictions may impact your ability to properly water-in the treatment.

For these reasons, many homeowners find that applying systemic treatments correctly and safely is challenging. Misapplication can lead to environmental contamination or ineffective control.

## Adapting to Florida-Specific Conditions

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Successfully managing whiteflies in South Florida requires an understanding of the local environment. The region's unique climate and soil conditions play a significant role in pest management.

**Subtropical Climate:** The lack of a hard freeze in South Florida means that whiteflies can reproduce year-round. There is no winter die-off to naturally reset the population. This makes continuous monitoring and proactive treatment essential.

**Humidity and Rainy Season:** High humidity can sometimes encourage the growth of beneficial fungi that attack whiteflies. However, frequent heavy rains during the summer wet season can wash away topical treatments like neem oil or insecticidal soap, requiring more frequent reapplication.

**Sandy Soil:** Florida's porous, sandy soil means that soil-applied treatments can leach quickly. It is crucial to follow the specific watering instructions on systemic insecticide labels to ensure the product is absorbed by the roots rather than washed past them.

**UF/IFAS Recommendations:** The University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) is the premier authority on landscaping and pest management in the state. They strongly advocate for Integrated Pest Management (IPM), which involves combining cultural, biological, and chemical controls to manage pests effectively while minimizing environmental impact. Following UF/IFAS guidelines is the best way to ensure your pest control efforts are safe and effective for Florida.

## When to Call a Professional

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While DIY methods can be effective for minor whitefly issues on small plants, there are several scenarios where calling a professional pest control service is the smartest and most cost-effective choice.

**Extensive Ficus Hedges:** If you have a large ficus hedge that is infested with whiteflies, topical sprays are nearly impossible to apply effectively, and DIY systemic treatments can be expensive and difficult to dose correctly. A professional has the equipment and expertise to treat large hedges efficiently.

**Large Trees:** Treating a mature tree for whiteflies requires specialized equipment to ensure the product reaches the entire canopy or is properly applied to the root zone.

**Persistent Infestations:** If you have tried neem oil, insecticidal soaps, and water blasting, but the whiteflies keep coming back, it is time to bring in an expert. Professionals can identify the specific species of whitefly and implement a targeted treatment plan.

**Time and Convenience:** Managing a severe whitefly infestation requires consistent monitoring and repeated treatments. If you do not have the time or inclination to battle these pests week after week, a professional service can handle the problem for you, providing peace of mind and protecting your landscape investment.

**Environmental Concerns:** Professional pest control technicians are trained in the safe and legal application of pesticides. They know how to apply treatments effectively while minimizing the risk of runoff into Florida's delicate waterways and protecting beneficial insects.

## Protect Your Florida Landscape

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Whiteflies are a persistent and destructive pest in South Florida, but they do not have to ruin your landscape. By learning to identify the early signs of an infestation, utilizing proper cultural practices, encouraging natural predators, and knowing when to utilize systemic treatments, you can keep your plants healthy and vibrant. Remember that early detection is the key to preventing severe damage.

O'Hara Pest Control has been helping homeowners across Palm Beach, Broward, Martin, and St. Lucie counties since 1973. If you need expert help with whiteflies or any other pest issue, call us at 561-655-9011 or visit [oharapestcontrol.com](http://oharapestcontrol.com) to schedule a free consultation. Our experienced technicians understand the unique challenges of Florida's climate and can develop a customized treatment plan to protect your valuable landscape.