

# Scale insects, indoors

GWF259  
Updated February 2009

Numbers of these sap-sucking pests can soar in favourable conditions. Once established, populations can be very damaging and hard to control.

**Q** How can I recognise indoor scale insects?

**A** Look out for tiny, 3-5mm, flattened scales pressed tightly against the plant's surface. They may appear on stems or leaves, especially on the undersides clustered near the leaf veins. As they get older, they become more raised and brown in colour. They are hard to see, and the first sign of them you may notice is yellowing leaves.

Like other sap-sucking insects, scale insects secrete a sugary solution called honeydew. This sticky liquid is deposited on the upper surfaces of the leaves and supports sooty moulds which blacken the leaves. Sooty mould is unsightly and restricts the ability of the leaves to photosynthesise. This weakens the plant and growth may be hampered. Ants are attracted to scale insects to 'milk' the honeydew, so ants running up and down the plant stems can point to scale insect infestation. Scale insects often go undetected on new purchases, so check new plants before placing them in the greenhouse or conservatory.

**Q** How many types of indoor scale insect are there?

**A** There are several common

kinds of scale insect including the following:

**Soft scale (*Coccus hesperidum*)**  
This scale insect is widespread and attacks a range of glasshouse and house plants. Scales are oval, usually light brown and can reach 5mm.

**Hemispherical scale (*Saissetia coffeae*)** Hemispherical, raised scales, dark brown when mature. Most common in warm, heated greenhouses.

**Brown scale (*Parthenolecanium corni*)** This looks similar to hemispherical scale. It attacks peaches and nectarines, indoors and outdoors. It thrives in unheated greenhouses.

**Q** What is the life cycle of scale insects?

**A** The scales are female insects, each capable of producing up to 2000 eggs per year. At low temperatures or outdoors, reproduction is restricted and occurs mainly during early summer. The eggs hatch into crawlers. These are mobile and move over the plants, looking for feeding sites. When they find a suitable site they develop into small scales, which are flatter and smaller than their parent. After between two and four moultings of their outer covering, they

become mature females.

The male scale insect is most uncommon. It is a tiny insect that is sometimes winged.

**Q** What can I do about them?

**A** If you can catch an infestation in its early stages, the scales can be brushed off with an old toothbrush and soapy water. If the foliage is soft and likely to be damaged by a toothbrush, use your thumbnail or a sponge to remove the pests.

Once there are too many scales for this, you will need to spray. Use a systemic insecticide containing imidacloprid or a contact insecticide containing natural fatty acids or rape seed oil. These are most effective against the crawler stage. The mobile larvae are usually active in spring and early summer, although in well-heated greenhouses and rooms, they may occur all year round. To be sure to kill most of the larvae, spray at least three times at 14 day intervals.

**Q** Is there a biological control for scale insects?

**A** Yes, the tiny parasitic wasp (*Metaphycus helvolus*) can be used indoors in the summer for some species of scale. To be sure

to get good results, send a sample of the scale when you place your order. The female wasp lays eggs inside the young scales. After feeding on the scales, the wasp emerges two to four weeks later and the cycle starts again. The wasp requires good light and warmth (at least 22°C) to be effective. First introduce the wasps three or four times at weekly intervals. A predatory ladybird (*Chilocorus nigritus*) that controls scale insects is also available.

## Suppliers of biological control

**Defenders Ltd**  
Occupation Road, Wye, Ashford,  
Kent TN25 5EN  
01233 813121  
[www.defenders.co.uk](http://www.defenders.co.uk)

**Green Gardener**  
Brook Hill, Brundall Road,  
Blofield NR13 4LB  
01603 715096  
[www.greengardener.co.uk](http://www.greengardener.co.uk)

**Just Green**  
Unit 14 Springfield Industrial  
Estate, Burnham-on-Crouch,  
Essex CM0 8UA  
01621 785088  
[www.just-green.com](http://www.just-green.com)

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