

# Thrips, greenhouse

GWF271

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Indoor thrips or thunder flies thrive in the warm, dry atmosphere of a greenhouse, attacking the flowers and foliage of many ornamental plants.

**Q** What are greenhouse thrips?

**A** They are sap-sucking insects that attack many plants and are commonly known as thunder flies or thunder bugs. Cyclamen, chrysanthemums and carnations, for example, are all attacked. Flowers and flower buds can support huge numbers of thrips. The warm, dry conditions in the greenhouse are ideal for greenhouse them to thrive.

**Q** How do I recognise thrip damage?

**A** When they feed, they pierce the leaves and flowers and feed on pollen. The damaged areas dry out, becoming speckled and silvery. Petals often turn brown. The insects are so small, sheltering beneath leaf sheaths and in buds, that they are seldom seen. To find them, hold a sheet of white paper beneath the plant and tap the stems sharply. The thrips will fall on to the paper where they are clearly visible. Be warned: some people find that thrips are an irritant to their skin.

**Q** What could I mistake them for?

**A** Spider mites and leaf hoppers will damage foliage in a similar way. If webbing can be seen beneath the foliage, look closely for tiny spider mites. Leaf

hoppers are much larger greenfly-like insects some 5mm long with prominent eyes and back legs. They can be found lurking beneath the foliage.

**Q** What do greenhouse thrips look like?

**A** They are tiny (less than 2mm long) narrow insects which, depending on species, may be yellow, black or brown. Each thrip has a pair of tiny wings, but you need a magnifying glass to see these. The female lays 60-80 tiny eggs in slits she cuts in the leaves and flowers. They don't always need to mate to lay viable eggs. The larvae is a tiny (about 0.4mm) wingless version of the adult and takes only 10-14 days to reach the pre-pupa stage. These either drop to the ground and form pupae or pupate on the leaves. Adults emerge ready to breed in 4-11 days. Under glass, generation follows generation all through the year as long as it is warm enough.

**Q** Can traps help detect them?

**A** The yellow sticky trap often used for catching whitefly will get them. It works even in dull weather. However, the best traps are a special blue kind. In fact, some growers find the blue traps so useful, they string them round the vulnerable crops.

**Q** What kinds of thrips might I come across?

**A** It is hard for gardeners to tell the different ones apart. The following are some common ones.

**Onion thrips** (*Thrips tabaci*) is a native species that attacks onions outdoors. It also goes for flowers, especially carnations and cyclamen, and carries tomato spotted wilt virus.

**Western flower thrips** (*Frankliniella occidentalis*). originates from North America, and got into Britain accidentally in 1986. It breeds very fast, and often spreads to outdoor plants from the greenhouse in summer. It is a menace to cyclamen and primulas in particular. It carries tomato spotted wilt virus.

**Greenhouse thrips** (*Heliethrips haemorrhoidalis*) is not as common as onion thrip. In particular it attacks arum, azaleas, ferns, fuchsias, orchids and tomatoes. You can recognise it by the blobs of reddish liquid on the undersides of the leaves. These blobs darken with age.

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

**A** Wetting plants with a jet of tepid water tends to wash larvae off plants. Keeping the

atmosphere damp will discourage them. Allowing the greenhouse to overheat will also encourage them. Increase shading and ventilation to prevent this. However, since it takes only a few thrips to disfigure flowers, spraying or a biological control is worth considering.

#### **Q Can they be sprayed?**

**A** Thrips are very often resistant to insecticides. If you find spraying with a general insecticide does not control your thrips, use an insecticide based on *fatty acid soaps*. You could also consider using a biological control.

#### **Q Tell me about biological controls.**

**A** Commercial growers use these extensively, but it is quite a complicated procedure. Two predators can be used: *Amblyseius cucumeris* and *Orius laevigatus*.

*Amblyseius* needs to be present before the thrips arrives. This makes it less suitable for gardeners who may not get thrips in the greenhouse every year. While waiting for the pest it feeds on pollen.

*Orius* can be introduced later, after the thrips are noticed, available from Just Green.

#### **Q Can greenhouse thrips be avoided?**

**A** Onion thrips live outdoors on many garden and wild plants. Greenhouses are very likely to be reinfested frequently from outside. For such small insects they are amazingly mobile.

Western flower thrips and greenhouse thrips are less able to survive outdoors, but they are very common in commercial greenhouses and there is a high risk of introducing them on bought-in plants.

It is worth having an autumn clear-up, discarding old plants and cleaning the inside of the greenhouse, so you start the following year with as few thrips as possible.

#### **Q What do I do with infested plants?**

**A** If you can control the thrips, new growth will be unaffected. If the plants cannot be saved, it is safe to compost them. Remember that there may be some pupae in the compost or soil. Ideally, bury it when digging outdoors. The buried pupae are unlikely to

survive to infest outdoor plants next spring.

#### **Suppliers of biological controls:**

##### **Biowise**

Hoyle Depot, Graffham,  
Petworth, West Sussex GU28 0LR  
01798 867574  
[www.biowise-biocontrol.co.uk](http://www.biowise-biocontrol.co.uk)

##### **Defenders Ltd**

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

##### **Harrod Horticultural**

Pinbush Road, Lowestoft, Suffolk  
NR33 7NL 0845 402 5300  
[www.harrodhorticultural.com](http://www.harrodhorticultural.com)

##### **Just Green**

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

##### **Scarletts**

Nayland Road, West Bergholt,  
Colchester,  
Essex CO6 3DH  
01206 240466  
[www.scarletts.co.uk](http://www.scarletts.co.uk)