

# Spider Mites



**Spider mites are a serious problem on some ornamental plants, especially skimmia and dwarf Alberta spruce.**

They may also affect other plants, such as arborvitae. Spider mites are tiny arachnids (spider relatives) with eight legs and no wings. There are a variety of species and colors, but they are so small that they are rarely seen without the aid of a magnifying lens. Unfortunately, they are often not noticed until damage becomes apparent. Symptoms of mite damage include:

- ❑ Skimmia: a light stippling of the leaf surface or an overall yellowing or paling of the leaf.
- ❑ Dwarf Alberta spruce and arborvitae: mites cause foliage to turn yellow to brown, which may eventually drop off.

Successful control of mites depends on understanding the mite's life cycle. Mites actively feed and reproduce during all but the coldest months. However, damage is most severe during hot, dusty, dry periods when mites dehydrate and must feed more frequently to re-hydrate. They damage plants by sucking juice from the underside of leaves, but damage is usually not evident unless the plant is stressed by another factor, most often drought.

## What you can do

- ❑ If you have skimmia or dwarf Alberta spruce, monitor for spider mite damage so management can begin early.
- ❑ Keep plants well watered. This is the cornerstone of limiting mite damage.
- ❑ Spray the plants (especially the leaf undersides) with a hard, cold water spray several times a day for several days. This will knock many of the mites off. Water sprays also raise the humidity around the plants, reducing the mites' need for moisture and feeding. With adequate humidity, natural predators

are often able to maintain spider mite populations at harmless levels.

- ❑ Mulch around your plants to reduce drought stress.
- ❑ Pay special attention to water needs of plants under eaves. Make sure to water the sides of plants facing the house.
- ❑ Apply a horticultural oil to the plant (especially the leaf undersides). This will target the mites while causing little damage to beneficial insects.
- ❑ If chemical control is necessary, avoid non-specific toxins to prevent harm to the beneficial insects.
- ❑ Consider replacing your skimmia and dwarf Alberta spruce with plants that are less prone to problems with spider mites.

**Skimmia replacements:** Consider sarcococca, mahonia and salal. All of these have a similar size and interest.

**Dwarf Alberta spruce replacements:** Unfortunately, there are no plants that will provide a similar shape and form without constant pruning. You may need to try a plant with a different appearance.

**Other replacement suggestions:** Visit our web site or contact your local extension office.

## What In Harmony can do

- ❑ Spray with horticultural oil. This is a safe, effective product that smothers the mites without harming beneficial insects.
- ❑ Spray with neem oil. The severity of the infection called for an insecticide. Neem, which is made from the nuts of the neem tree, interrupts the reproduction of spider mites. Neem oil has very low toxicity to mammals and has been used for centuries in India. 

