

# Azalea Lacebug: Not So Delicate Menace

*By Carol Allen—Germantown, Maryland*

Although they may be a cliché in Washington, DC, many people still love azaleas! The photo-op, feast-your-eyes displays in our area are numerous, and azaleas are pretty easy-care, aren't they? Maybe!

One of the biggest sins-against-azaleas is improper siting, and that influences the occurrence of the azalea lacebug. The azalea lacebug (*Stephanitis pyrioides*) is a sucking insect that can gather in huge numbers on the underside of the leaves. From the upper surface, the damage is very similar to spider mite stippling. Fortunately, the azalea lacebug is much larger and more easily seen.

This insect overwinters in the egg stage. The eggs had been inserted into the midribs and large veins of the underside of the leaves the previous fall and the nymphs emerge concurrent with the new leaves in the spring. The nymphs go through five instars as black, spiny juveniles and can grow into adults in as quickly as 30 days. The adults are about 1/10" long with back-swept, translucent, and netted wings. Since the body is a cream color, a hand lens may be needed to get a good look at them. However, they are easy to spot, because both nymphs and adults are usually present in fairly high numbers if conditions are right. Even more incriminating are the numerous "tar spots" of black fecal material.

As the hordes of lacebugs feed on the leaves, the loss of chlorophyll renders the surface stippled and silvery. The damage is aesthetically unappealing, can cause early leaf drop, and generally weakens the plant.

There are three generations per year in the Mid-Atlantic region; May, July, and September. The best control is siting azaleas in the shade, where natural enemies (jumping spiders, lady beetles, lacewing, and others) will keep the population suppressed. If chemical control is needed, a spray program can be initiated in early to mid-May or as soon as the nymphs are spotted. Horticultural or neem oil are preferred products, although others are also effective (read the label of the product for application directions and insects they control). Regardless of the chemical used, thoroughly coat the underside of the leaves. A good effort to control the early generation will limit later populations. Caution: Do not spray while the shrub is in bloom, so you are not killing our beneficial pollinators.



Fig. 1 and 2 Azalea lacebug photos are courtesy of Keisotyo and Forest & Kim Starr [CC BY 3.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons, commons.wikimedia.org.



Azaleas are not the only plant that suffers from this family of pests. The azalea lacebug and the andromeda lacebug (*S. takeyai*) are non-native pests, whereas the rhododendron (*S. rhododendri*) and hawthorn lacebug (*Corythucha cydoniae*) are native species. In general, each species is specific for its host, but the hawthorn lacebug plagues many members of the rose family, including buttonbush, cotoneaster, flowering quince, pyracantha, and shadbush to name a few.

Keep an eye out in the spring for these widespread pests, and either move the plants to the shade (if possible), or initiate control measures early. Adequate moisture during times of drought and an appropriate organic mulch will help boost the plants' natural immunity.

## About the Author

Carol Allen describes herself as a committable plant-a-holic. She has more than 25 years' experience in the horticulture industry, with a special interest in plant pests and diseases; is a Licensed Pesticide Applicator in the state of Maryland; and is an ISA-Certified Arborist.