



### **Home Remedies** **Gary Westlake**

A deer fly came into the house and I decided to take care of him before he hurt one of us. While keeping an eye on him, I grabbed for the insect spray in the cupboard and accidentally got oven cleaner instead. I sprayed before I realized my mistake. The fly took a couple of back flips in the air, fell to the ground, quivered a couple of times and was still. A few seconds later his legs fell off. I realize that this was overkill, but accidents like it are often the origin of many scientific discoveries.

For years, gardeners have been searching for magic bullets to solve their problems while minimizing their environmental footprint. Many swear by various concoctions they have created from readily available household ingredients. But do they really work and are they safe to use?

Today, most people are suspicious of products that have been synthesized by the big chemical companies and with good reason. These have often proved to cause serious illness and unwanted side effects. They have sometimes been poorly tested and are marketed for their ability to kill thoroughly and to kill everything.

So it is no wonder gardeners turn to organic home remedies. But just because an insecticide has an organic origin or it is a common household substance, does not make it effective or safe. Regardless of origin, these are all chemicals that can have unwanted effects.

There are people that believe that spraying a certain brand of mouthwash around your picnic table will repel mosquitoes for days. It may be true that when droplets of mouthwash happen to land on an individual mosquito, it will become irritated enough to go to someone else's picnic table. But it is sure to be rapidly replaced by hoards of other mosquitoes.

Garlic on the other hand seems to have some real insect repellent qualities. Various mixtures are suggested, for example put one clove with 2 cups of water in a blender, strain, mix in a gallon of water and spray the liquid to repel white fly from your houseplants. There are some downsides to this. You have to spray all of your plants or the insects will find the leaves not sprayed and concentrate on them. Also you have to live with the idea that your house will smell like the kitchen of an Italian restaurant. Similarly, hot pepper sprays can act as a repellent for insects but you have to be very careful not to

spray yourself or others.

The first thing to try if you find insects eating your favourite plants is to knock them off with a stream of water from the hose. Often the insects like aphids have trouble climbing back onto the plants. The next thing to try is to patrol your garden and hand pick insects that you see. This works for the lily beetle.

If physical removal methods fail, then you can try knocking the insects back. The most effective home remedy for insects that has low impact on the environment is a dilute solution of dish soap. Mix one part dish soap to 40 parts water and spray. Since there is a danger that prolonged contact will harm some plants, it is a good idea to rinse the soap off after 10 to 15 minutes. The soap works through direct contact on the insect and results in disruption of their surfaces making it difficult for them to breathe. Dish soap has no repellent quality or lasting effect so you have to get it physically on the insect while you are spraying.

Similarly, dormant oil is used in early spring before fruit trees leaf out to reduce the numbers of overwintering insects. It works by suffocating the insects or their eggs. Dormant oil, which is a light oil, should have little lasting environmental impact.

If you are bothered by a few holes in your hostas from slugs and snails, then just break off the leaves with holes and the hostas will grow new ones. If the problem is too extensive, then try pouring one part household ammonia to 9 parts water over the hosta shoots and the surrounding soil as the plants emerge in the spring. You can put out saucers of beer for them. The slugs are attracted to the beer and drown. You can also sprinkle diatomaceous earth or crushed egg shells around the plants.

Fungal diseases are very difficult to control because once you see the problem, it is just about too late to do anything about it. You have to catch the infection at a very early stage. If you wish to try, I would suggest a mixture of 1 tablespoon of baking soda, 1-2 teaspoons of dish soap, 1-2 teaspoons of an oil such as canola oil mixed in a gallon of water. Spray this on your susceptible plants once a week but try it out first on a small area because some plants are sensitive to the spray. It is often more effective to be careful when you are watering and to prune your plants so that they get lots of ventilation.

Weeds are sometimes hard to control in the cracks of sidewalks. Undiluted household vinegar or better horticultural vinegar will kill the parts plants where it comes in contact. This means the leaves die in a couple of days but the roots stay alive and the plant comes back. So to be effective, you need to flood the ground so the roots are exposed as well. Digging is often still the best option.

I am always watching for ways to be an environmentally conscious gardener, so I will keep looking for home remedies for you and let you know if I see any good ones.

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