

Insect Management on Desert Produce Crops

Western Flower Thrips

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Distribution and Host Plants

This native thrips species has recently become a serious pest to all leafy vegetables grown in the desert. Western flower thrips (WFT) are most important in head, leaf, romaine and baby mix lettuces, cabbage and spinach because of the cosmetic scarring they cause to leaves and contamination of harvested plant parts. WFT have a wide host range and occurs on several vegetable crops, including cucumber, onion, pepper, potato, lettuce, and tomato. Field crops on which WFT are commonly found in the desert includes alfalfa, cotton, canola, millet, and wheat. Numerous weeds serve as good hosts for WFT including black nightshade, cheese weed, dandelion, jimson weed, lambsquarters, lantana, pigweed, and prickly lettuce but numerous other species also can serve as hosts.

Description and Seasonal Development

WFT thrives in moderately warm and dry conditions. They can be present season long in leafy vegetables, but are usually most abundant on spring crops after temperatures begin to increase. They can complete a single generation in as little as 20 days; average temperatures of about 86°F are optimal for population growth. WFT life cycle is between simple and complete consisting of the egg, two larval stages, prepupae, pupa, and adult stages. Small white bean shaped eggs are laid into plant leaves, petioles and fruit and generally hatch in 2 to 7 days. Immature thrips go through two larval instars, which are feeding stages, followed by non-feeding prepupal and pupal stages. Larvae resemble adult WFT except for their smaller size, lack of wings, and are pale yellow in color. Larval development time may require 9-12 days in the field depending on temperature. The larvae and adults are somewhat gregarious, often feeding together in small groups. At maturity, the larvae drop to the ground to pupate. The prepupal and pupal stages require about 4-5 days to develop under ideal conditions. The prepupa resembles the larvae but have short-wing pads and erect antennae. The pupae have long wing pads, and their antennae are bent backwards along the head. Prepupae and pupae do not feed and complete development in the soil or ground litter beneath the plants. The adult WFT have fully formed fringed wings. Adult females WFT range in color from light yellow, yellow with brown blotches on the body, to dark brown. Male western flower thrips are light yellow. WFT have reddish orange ocellar pigmentation and eight segmented antennae. Adults generally live for 3-4 weeks. Females may mate or reproduce parthenogenetically. Egg production by females will vary with crop.

Economic Damage

Although WFT can be found on most commercial vegetables and melons grown in the desert, they are considered serious economic pests of leafy vegetables. WFT have a great potential for causing cosmetic

damage to head lettuce throughout the growing season, and particularly at harvest if not managed properly. Romaine and leaf lettuce types are even at higher risk, where thrips damage to harvestable leaves can result in excessive trimming and reduced plant weights due to both adult and immature feeding. WFT have rasping-sucking mouthparts and feed by making a hole in the epidermis with a single mandible, puncturing cells with the piercing stylets, and sucking the plant exudate. Adults and nymphs feed on both upper and lower leaf surfaces, in the leaf folds, and in protected inner leaves. Feeding on the mid-ribs will cause scarring, leaf discoloration (bronzing) and distortion. High populations of thrips can result in a significant number of cosmetic blemishes on marketable leaf portions. Such damage may turn into larger necrotic lesions in postharvest storage and transit. The presence of live thrips can contaminate the harvested product. Baby spinach crops are susceptible to thrips damage on the young terminal growth because as leaves expand and elongate, they become scarred and distorted. Thrips can also vector some plant viruses, including tomato spotted wilt virus, which can be a serious problem. To date, no thrips-transmitted viruses have been found in economic levels on leafy vegetables in the desert.

Management of WFT

Monitoring/Sampling

Like aphids, thrips can disperse onto leafy vegetables at anytime, thus it is important that fields be monitored regularly. WFT can generally be found throughout the plant, feeding on the undersides of leaves, but prefer to hide in complex plant parts and other folded tissues where they are difficult to detect and reach with insecticides. There are several methods for sampling for WFT on leafy vegetables. Sticky traps (yellow or blue) placed on field margins can indicate when adults begin to disperse into field from adjacent vegetation. Adults fly when temperatures exceed 63-65 °F during the day and when light intensity is moderate to high. Direct observation of whole plants is the most accurate method of sampling for WFT. This involves careful examination of plant parts for the presence of WFT and feeding scars. It can be done when sampling aphids and other pests. Care should be taken to carefully examine folds in leaf tissue near the base of the leaves for immatures. Experience has shown that if 3-5 thrips are found on a small plant, there are probably 10 times as many hidden within folds in the leaves or that had dispersed from the plant. Dislodging is another method that involves beating or jarring plants to dislodge adult and larvae onto sheet or sticky surface where they can be counted and identified. It should be done during the morning when adults are less active. This method can be time consuming and does not measure actual numbers but rather provides a relative estimate of WFT abundance.

Natural / Biological Control

Natural enemies, including predaceous mites, minute pirate bugs, predatory thrips and lacewings, can be found feeding on WFT. However, *on desert crops, these natural enemies are not capable of suppressing WFT populations below economic levels.* Several common entomopathogenic fungi such as *Beauveria bassiana* have been formulated but have only shown marginal levels of WFT suppression under field conditions.

Cultural Practices

Cultural management has only a limited impact on WFT populations because of their ability to rapidly disperse from native vegetation, weeds and adjacent crops. WFT outbreaks are often associated with fields heavily infested with weedy mustards or fields near commercial plantings of mustard, alfalfa or wheat. Crop placement can help if growers avoid planting vegetable crops near grain fields, weedy

drains or fields and grassy areas. Overhead sprinkler irrigation has been shown to suppress WFT numbers in romaine and spinach by as much as 50%, but insecticide treatments are generally still necessary, particularly in late spring when WFT adult dispersal is high.

Insecticidal Control

Because cultural management has only a limited impact on WFT populations, and few natural enemies that feed on them, control with insecticides is often the only viable management alternative to prevent economic damage. Insecticides can be applied to leafy vegetables to minimize feeding and contamination. The following points should be considered when attempting to chemically manage populations in leafy vegetables. Experience suggests that insecticides should be applied when larvae numbers are first observed, and when scarring on young leaves is observed. The AT is exceeded when WFT larvae average 2 larvae per plant and 10 % of plants have fresh feeding scars on leaves. This is particularly important when temperatures are increasing. If possible, apply treatments during the mid-morning when adults are most active. Several products are available that when used in combination will provide efficacy with varying residual activity (Lannate, acephate, Radiant, Torac,).

Frequency of applications will depend on residual of products and immigration of adults from surrounding vegetation. Plants should be sampled at 2–3-day intervals following treatment. Experience has shown that the most effective insecticides essentially maintain WFT populations at constant levels and only reduce numbers temporarily. This should be taken into consideration when determining when to treat. Plant size and temperature may be important factors contributing to the efficacy of insecticides. The larger the plant, the more difficult it is to obtain good coverage underneath the leaf and near the base of the plant. Also, higher temperatures drive WFT development, but may also influence their activity to more readily come in contact with the insecticides.



Adult



Larva



Plate 1. A) WFT adult and damage to lettuce leaf, B) WFT damage to baby romaine leaf , C) Adult WFT feeding on pollen in cantaloupe bloom, D) WFT larvae and adults infesting lettuce head



Plate 2. A) WFT damage to head lettuce leaves, B) WFT damage to romaine plants