

Somewhere, crouched in the dark recesses of weeds and woods, is an ever-present horde of beetles, bugs, and flies eager to inspect the newest addition to your garden. Fruits, of course, are a special treat for insects. Maggots like to burrow through the pulp, the codling moth is quick to zero in on apples, and uncountable crowds of soft-bodied aphids swarm over buds and leaves. For small infestations and a few trees, pests can be handpicked; on cloudy days, tent worms will cluster together. Heavily infested branches can be sawed off and burned.

When large numbers overrun your fruit trees, you'll have to decide how important a harvest is to you. You have several choices: do nothing (and likely lose the crop); remove insects and wormy fruit often (and get a few usable fruits); or spray (and get a fair-size harvest). The backyard has an effective arsenal of chemical sprays available, which, if used intelligently, can handle most bugs.

It's possible to match a spray to each particular insect and disease problem. But such a program would be complicated. A good--and safe--bet is to rely on an all-purpose spray mixture. With the right combination of chemicals, a combination of problems--from scale to scab--can be kept under control. Many chemical companies sell prepared mixtures that contain one or two fungicides and two or more insecticides. Or you can buy materials separately and combine your own. For a general-purpose spray, add the following to one gallon of water:

Captan

(50 percent wettable powder)--two tablespoons

Malathion

(25 percent wettable powder)--three tablespoons

Methoxychlor

(50 percent wettable powder)--three tablespoons

Both methoxychlor and malathion keep insects at bay, and captan is effective against most fungus diseases. If you prefer to buy a premixed, all-purpose spray, be sure to check the label so you know what you are getting and the pests it will control. Some of these sprays will be in dust form that can be applied as is. Unfortunately, although dusts are convenient, they do not adhere or cover as well as sprays and are especially risky on windy days when dust is carried beyond the afflicted plant.

As a rule, application times are governed by the various budding, blossoming, and fruiting stages of fruit trees. Avoid spraying when trees are in full bloom because chemicals will harm bees.

Without chemicals, growing large quantities of unblemished fruit in the backyard would be practically impossible. But chemical sprays also can be harmful to things besides insects, if handled carelessly. Keep these safety tips in mind when handling spray materials.

Store chemicals in original containers and keep them out of the reach of children.

Discontinue spraying at least ten days before you plan to harvest.

Clean sprayer thoroughly after each use. Do not dump leftover spray where it can collect in puddles.

Read manufacturer's directions line by line and follow recommendations carefully.