

HORTICULTURAL OILS - SAFE PEST CONTROL

By Janet Marinelli, Master Gardener, NYC Urban Horticulture Program



April isn't just tax time – It's time to apply a horticultural oil spray to suffocate any insects that have spent the winter on your trees and shrubs.

Many gardeners start itching to get out the sprayer or call in the arborist come March, and the first signs of spring. But the truth of the matter is that oil sprays should not be applied until the buds begin to swell and burst into bloom. That's when mites, aphids, scales and other pests are starting to hatch, or come out of hibernation and are therefore most vulnerable to the oil's smothering mode of action. Spraying should be done only on a dry, sunny morning when no freeze is expected for at least 24 hours.

Horticultural oils, related to the oils used in skin lotions, are among the safest of pesticides. What's more, in 105 years of use, strains have appeared.

The oils must be applied properly however, in order to be environmentally safe. If, for example, spraying is done near a body of water, the oils can kill fish by coating their gills. Also be advised that some professionals add other, more toxic, pesticides to the oils they use. Make sure you let your arborist or landscaper know if you want only oil sprayed on your plants.

If you plan to do the spraying yourself, look for an oil with a **UR, (unsulfonated residue), of 92% or higher.** This information should be listed on the label. Keep in mind that the equipment available to homeowners will not spray than 15 feet, so your more lofty trees will require a professional's attention.

Fruit trees, particularly the apples and pears, are prime candidates for oil sprays. So are spruce trees, hemlocks, and euonymus that have had infestation problems in the past.



Some Caution: Never treat trees or shrubs under stress from drought, winter injury, or other causes. And always be sure to check the label for the list of plant; including fir, Japanese and sugar maples, and taxus, which can be damaged by horticultural oils.