



GARDENING QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

University of Illinois Extension: Cook County

Yes, those fungus gnats are pesky roommates! They can also be pesky to ditch because they certainly can be quite persistent, as you have experienced. While they do respond to chemical insecticide sprays, this isn't something you'd want to use except as a very last resort, and even if so, you wouldn't want to try that indoors.

The good news is that there are safer ways than gassing the gnats. First, an understanding of these critters is in order: "Fungus gnats" are one of several species of flies that feed on decaying organic matter. The ones that plague your houseplants feed primarily on organic matter in the top layers of soil, which is also where they lay their eggs and where their larvae thrive. Ironically, the better your soil, the happier they are -- nothing beats a good lunch of rich, moist, composty soil with lots of decaying carbon-based morsels!

One key here is the "moist" part: Without the water, the decay dries up, and the Scaridae (that's the dark-winged fungus gnat family) snack bar goes empty. So, one method to eliminate the bugs is simply this: Make sure you allow your pots to dry an inch or two down from the surface between waterings. For most houseplants, this is generally good advice anyhow -- far more are killed by over- than under-watering, and indeed some might argue that fungus gnats can be a sign of over-watering or by frequent light watering, instead of less frequent but thorough drinks.

The above technique will require a bit of patience. Fungus gnats don't feed or drink much during their 7 to 10 day adult life, so the above works by depriving the next generations of a good environment in which to hatch and grow. A female adult lays up to a few hundred eggs on or barely into the soil, which hatch in about 5 days; those larvae munch their way through several stages across two weeks, with the final pupal stage taking another five days or so. So, they spend nearly three weeks in the pot, which is your opportunity to starve the kids by keeping the "house" -- the upper layer of soil -- relatively dry and decay-free. Note, too, they have continuous lifecycles, so you won't get 'em all at once, but on an ongoing basis you should see a significant reduction in -- and eventual elimination of -- the problem.