
Question of the Week

Q: An insect that looks like a tiny turtle encased in an oval of glass seems to be eating holes in my tomatoes. What is it?

A: Many New Hampshire gardeners have been finding tortoise beetles chewing holes in their tomato, potato and pepper plants this year. When you examine them closely, these small (1/4 inch), oval, beetles do indeed look like miniature turtles encased in translucent membranes. (Though from a distance, you might mistake one for a bird dropping.)

One common species feeds on leaves of plants in the tomato family, chewing holes about the same size as the adult beetles. Unlike some tortoise beetle species, which can shimmer with iridescent gold, blue, or burgundy, adults of this species are dark brown. (A related species, “gold bug” is iridescent and feeds on morning glory and sweet potato.) Tortoise beetle larvae are flat, usually the same color as the leaves they feed on, and often carry their own droppings on their backs, probably to deter predators. Leaves of low-growing plants full of holes may indicate feeding by tortoise beetle adults and larvae.

Generally, tortoise beetles don't cause enough damage on garden vegetable plants to require chemical control; however, if they become a serious pest, tortoise beetles can be controlled with an insecticide registered for the particular crop against chewing insects. You probably won't find an insecticide registered for tortoise beetles because of their low economic importance. If you do choose to use a pesticide, follow label directions carefully.

Got questions? UNH Cooperative Extension's Education Center Info Line offers practical help finding answers for your lawn and garden questions. Call toll free at 1- 877-398-4769, M-F, 9:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m. You can also email us at answers@unh.edu