

OLD-FASHIONED REMEDIES

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I don't like to use chemicals, and during my time as a horticultural student I learnt a few ways of keeping certain pests and diseases away. A lot of these cures were well-known and in common use before the invention of modern-day chemicals. At the very least, the following methods are pretty harmless.

Fungal Control

- Good housekeeping is very important. Diseases overwinter on the plant or in the soil. Get rid of any infected foliage by burning it; do not put it on the compost heap.
- Peach leaf curl is caused by a fungal disease which disfigures all aspects of the plant. To help prevent this, it is necessary to stop the spores from infected leaves which have dropped to the ground transferring back to the tree. A canopy can be erected to cover the tree, which stops the rainwater from splashing around the base of the tree. Alternatively, the surrounding ground can be covered, after leaves have fallen and been removed, which again prevents the rain from splashing any spores lying in wait.
- A solution of 1% bicarbonate of soda mixed with water, and a little liquid soap to break the surface tension, can prevent rust fungus for up to 6 weeks. The solution will not kill fungal spores, but it helps to reduce their numbers. The leaves should be sprayed on both sides.
- Milk is also good for fungal control and viral infection. It is especially effective on powdery mildew. You need a ratio of 40% milk to 60% water. Spray in full sun every 10 days as a preventative control.

Pest Control

- Vinegar may help get rid of narcissus fly: half-fill a container with cider vinegar and cover with clingfilm. Poke a few holes in the clingfilm and place the container near the affected plant. The flies won't be able to resist the smell of the vinegar, and will be trapped within the container.
- Rhubarb leaves can be used as an insecticide, as they contain oxalic acid which is toxic to both humans and insects. Pick three or four rhubarb leaves and chop them up roughly. Put some boiling water into a saucepan and add the leaves, then simmer for 30 minutes. Take off the heat and leave to cool. Strain the liquid, then add a teaspoon of liquid soap with about half as much again of water. This can then be used every couple of days until the infestation has cleared.
- Elderberry and eucalyptus leaves are also effective sprays for insect control. Prepare them in the same way as for rhubarb. Grated horse-radish steeped in water for 24 hours is effective as both insecticide and fungicide spray.
- Liquid soft soap can also be used as an insecticide, but it only needs to be diluted with water before use. It is particularly effective on blackfly. Another solution for keeping blackfly away from broad beans is to grow lupins in the garden, as they attract blackfly and will help keep beans free from attack.
- *Chrysanthemum coccineum* contains pyrethrum, which is used as a commercial pesticide. You can make your own insecticide from it by harvesting the flowers on a dry day and then hanging them upside down to dry further for a couple of days. Crush the dried flowers, then soak them in water for three hours before straining the liquid and using as a spray. There is evidence that this also acts as an insect repellent.

Potentially effective deterrents when grown as companion plants:

Alfalfa & flax	- wireworm
Basil	- aphids, flies, beetles and weevils
Borage	- deters beetles on potatoes
Carrots	- onion fly
Catnip	- ants, aphids, a wide range of beetles and weevils
Celery	- cabbage white butterflies
Clover	- cabbage root fly
Dill	- red spider mite
Fennel	- aphids
Horseradish	- an effective fruit tree spray
Leeks	- carrot root fly
Marigolds	- whitefly and other aphids
Petunias	- aphids and leafhoppers
Radish	- root aphids and beetles
Rue	- flea beetles
Rosemary	- cabbage moths, carrot fly
Sage	- many cabbage pests
Tansy	- ants, aphids and a wide range of beetles
Thyme	- whitefly
Tomatoes	- cabbage whitefly (when grown next to cabbages)

Beneficial Weeds (I'm not sure I really want them though)

- Chickweed, clover and vetch make great green manures.
- The penetrating tap roots of dock, dandelion and comfrey bring up minerals and nutrients, such as potassium and calcium, from the subsoil, and improve soil structure and drainage.
- Nettles and dandelions attract a wide range of pollinators, including hoverflies and bees.

And finally...

- Talcum powder or French chalk can be used to cover cut stems or stumps, to control weeping and prevent disease entering the wound.