Plectranthus - An Interesting Plant for Fall Sales?

By: Stanton Gill

Back in 2009 I was visiting a greenhouse and a really fetching purple colored flowering plant caught my eye – *Plectranthus*. *Plectranthus* is native to South Africa and a member of the mint family (Lamiaceae). There are many species of *Plectranthus* (around 44) that are currently used as ornamental herbaceous plants throughout the world’s gardens. They come in a number of shapes and colors ranging from white, pink to dark mauves, and lavenders. This plant is easy to propagate from cuttings.

The genus *Plectranthus* includes common plants such as creeping Charlie and Swedish ivy. Although many of the plants in this genus have a creeping habit, ‘Mona Lavender’ has beautiful dark green leaves with contrasting undersides that are purple and very elegant looking. In the 1990’s, ‘Mona Lavender’ was bred at the Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens in Cape Town, South Africa. It was a fairly long process involving much hand pollination and the raising of many thousands of seedlings, back crossing, and raising many more thousands of seedlings - each time selecting out the best, most attractive individuals to go through the next round of breeding. Ball International Company released *Plectranthus* ‘Mona Lavender’ and it is worth looking into for fall sales.

‘Mona Lavender’ is a quick-growing perennial shrub, reaching 24 to 30 inches in height but it is not winter hardy here in Maryland. It is ideal for fall sales since customers will need new plants each year. It does very well in either shaded or partly sunny locations. When it receives sun it tends to stay smaller and more compact, and the leaves exhibit a much more intense coloring, especially on the purple undersides of the leaf. The foliage is unique and special, but the real prize on this plant is the dark lavender flower spikes. ‘Mona Lavender’ is ideal for a mass planting in your garden or for container gardening. Like most *Plectranthus* species plants need a fair amount of water. The plants benefit from being pinched back to induce better branching and compactness. So far, the only pest we have had reported on this plant is mealybug. I have not seen thrips, aphids or mites as a problem on this plant so far.
Lewis Mite Activity in Poinsettia
By: Stanton Gill
This September has been almost ideal growing weather for poinsettia and pansy crops with low nighttime temperatures and bright sunny days. In visiting greenhouse growers I am seeing excellent quality poinsettia plants and great looking pansy crops.

The temperatures are starting to drop more dramatically as we reach the end of September with the temperature dipping to the 40 °F range last night (September 22nd). The recent cool nights have resulted in many growers turning on their heating systems to bring up the temperature. When the temperature is increased in the greenhouse, humidity levels often go down. This lower humidity level combined with the bright sunny days are perfect conditions for a Tetranychid mite called Lewis mite (Eotetranychus lewisi). The Lewis mite is not native to Maryland outdoor landscapes. It is found in California and Central America. It is often brought in on rooted and unrooted poinsettia cuttings. Most growers are familiar with two-spotted spider mites. Lewis mites are somewhat similar but smaller in size than the familiar two-spotted mite. Lewis mites are only 0.5 millimeters which is about half the size of the more common two-spotted spider mite. These tiny mites have slender, straw-colored to greenish-yellow bodies and do not have the two distinguishing spots on each side of the body as observed on the two-spotted spider mite, but do have four tiny spots on their abdomen that can be seen best using magnification.

The mites are found on the undersides of the foliage in September. If you let the population build up in October you can usually find them on the upper and lower leaf surfaces. The injury symptoms observed on poinsettias is best described as stippling, or the presence of numerous small pinpoint spots, creating a mottled or speckled appearance on upper leaf surfaces. Severe infestations often cause the leaves to turn yellow (chlorotic) or bronze and may cause leaf drop. From a distance, growers often describe Lewis mite injury as looking similar to micronutrient deficiencies; closer examination will reveal the fine stippling of the leaf surface.

Early detection of Lewis mites is essential and allows for treatment to isolated areas before spread occurs throughout an entire crop and causes significant economic losses. As the crop canopy closes in, it becomes increasingly difficult for growers to control mites using miticides since they are located almost exclusively on the undersides of the leaves where it is hard for spray applications to make good contact with the mites. Place a clipboard under foliage with a white paper on the clipboard. Wrap the foliage over the clipboard and look for the mites on the white surface using a 10 -20 X magnifier.

In August we held a biological control conference for greenhouse growers. If you are trying biological control, here is your chance. Use one of the following predatory mites: *Amblyseius californicus, A. cucumeris,*
The predatory mite *Phytoseiulus persimilis* and a small midge, *Feltiella acarigusa*, are both predators commonly used for controlling Lewis mites. When using predators, it is best to release them before the mite population climbs too high and to make multiple releases throughout the production cycle. When done properly, controlling spider mites biologically can be just as effective as using chemical strategies. September is a good time to start releases.

There are many miticides available for controlling Lewis mites. At this time of year I like to use miticides that act as ovicides (clofentezine and hexythiazox) which primarily act on mite eggs and very young larvae and are best used when mite populations are low. Several products containing the active ingredients abamectin, bifenazate, chlorfenapyr, etoxazole, fenpyroximate, and spiromesifen are effective at controlling various life stages of these mites. Let me know if you are seeing Lewis mite in your greenhouse since we try to track its activity each season. Thanks for your help – sgill@umd.edu.

**Information for Poinsettia Growers**

Electronic Grower Resources Online (also known as e-Gro) has posted several new fact sheets on poinsettias and nutrition written by Dr. Brian Whipker of North Carolina State University.

Check them out at: [http://e-gro.org/alerts.php](http://e-gro.org/alerts.php)

**Save the Date - October 23, 2014**

The University of Maryland Extension and the Maryland Greenhouse Growers’ Association are organizing a greenhouse tour of Hillcrest Nursery in Millers, MD from noon to 4:00 (lunch included) on October 23. Steve Hershfeld will speak on how to obtain organic certification for greenhouse herbs. Details will be coming soon.