

# A Pink Hibiscus Mealybug Primer ... and Update.

Prepared by Joe Garofalo\*

## The Primer, 7-22-2002\*\*

Nobody likes it when forces beyond his control threaten his ability to make a living. Just as a bluebird or a lion will defend his territory, we humans listen attentively and react to threats, sometimes before we understand the nature of those threats. And so it is with nurserymen when new pests like the pink hibiscus mealybug (PHM) rear their ugly little heads.

This threat, however, is further complicated by the introduction of the guiding (some might say *meddling*) hand of “Big Brother.” (It’s not easy to forget our recent, and continuing, bad experience with citrus canker.)

## SOURCES OF INFORMATION.

Cooperative Extension has always been a source of information, and we in Extension strive to be so even now, when the news is not always good. In most cases we are only messengers, gathering information from various sources and delivering it to those who need it. In the best of situations we can also help our clientele understand and interpret the information, so they may react with the benefit of understanding.

We have recently seen some individuals react very loudly and negatively, but long before they understood the situation. What we don’t need right now is misinformation, especially misinformation based on the abandonment of both science and reason. So, let’s look at the facts concerning the PHM, try to understand those facts, and develop a reasonable response, one based on good science. And let us try something else—let’s assume that Big Brother is trying to help us, not hurt us, which I believe is the case.

## STUDY THE FACTS.

First of all, the evidence to date indicates that PHM simply cannot be eradicated. It can, however, be excluded from limited areas for a time through the use of careful monitoring and the prompt, judicious application of pesticides.

Second, once they are established, certain parasitoids can reduce the population of PHM in an area by as much as 98%, reducing the damage potential to insignificant levels. Third, because nurseries distribute plants, it is imperative that we maintain zero tolerance of PHM in nurseries.

## A REASONED RESPONSE.

These points lead me to believe that the present policy is reasonable. Let’s exclude PHM in nurseries, using pesticides, so nurseries can stay open; but release parasitoids and use no chemicals where they are found in landscapes. If we get spray-happy we risk killing the parasitoids. That’s good science.

It’s also good policy: if we can assure our in-state and out-of-state customers (and their inspectors) that our nurseries are free of PHM, we can avoid an industry-wide quarantine. Unfortunately, if your nursery or mine is found to harbor PHM, we’re going to lose some business and no small amount of goodwill among our customers. That hurts...but it cannot be avoided. I simply can’t think of a better alternative for our industry as a whole.

## TURN TO THE EXPERTS.

For this policy to work, you and I have to accept some things. Primary among those things is that it takes an insect taxonomist to positively identify PHM or any other insect. I am not an entomologist or insect taxonomist. Are you? Let’s not question

the opinions of the very specialists we may turn to tomorrow for help with some other problem. Your nursery will only be quarantined after the taxonomy specialist has positively identified PHM among specimens submitted from your nursery.

## ACT RESPONSIBLY.

The next thing we have to accept is responsibility. You have been given research-based recommendations on the control of mealybugs in your nursery ... you should now be scouting religiously and doing everything you legally can do to eliminate any and all mealybugs from your nursery.

Burn plants if you suspect an infestation of any mealybug. Spray. Drench. Don’t move plants from one growing block to another. Set aside suspicious plants in an isolated area. Do whatever you can to turn this devil from your door. Oh, you don’t have time for all that? Get yourself quarantined and you’ll have lots of time!

Your Dade Chapter FNGA recently joined with Extension to deliver an excellent informational seminar. Our two transition presidents, Jane Spurling and Claudio Rosario, both are to be commended for coming forward quickly and without hesitation when we all needed information. Our seminar was the first such response to the PHM infestation in Florida. There was no dragging of feet here. The University of Florida, USDA-APHIS, and FDACS-DPI all did their parts to educate us. Now, I believe, the ball is in our court—for goodness sake, let’s not drop it.

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## Update, 8-6-2002.

In an effort to keep all concerned parties informed on the progress of the PHM infestation in South Florida, the following information was prepared July 26, and updated today, August 6. Some is a repeat of earlier news; some is fresh today from the Miami-Dade office of FDACS-DPI:

- There are 15 DPI inspectors in Miami-Dade County alone working on PHM inspections. (It had said that there were only five for both Miami-Dade & Broward.)
- It is not possible to say how many nurseries they inspect per day or week because nurseries vary so much in size.
- Nursery inspections continue at an aggressive rate.
- “Biometric” inspections (of roadsides, natural areas, woods, wetlands, etc.) also continue.
- If suspicious specimens are found in a nursery, these are sent to the insect taxonomist for identification.
- The nurseryman is given verbal notice at that time that his nursery is “under suspicion.” You should already be on a program including monitoring, sanitation (destruction of suspect plants), & preventive treatments. Now would be a good time to step up to the prescribed quarantine treatments. (See PHM factsheet 3.) Speak with your DPI inspector so you can document these actions.
- If, and only if, a positive identification of PHM is made, is the nursery placed under quarantine. Identification is considered a priority, so it will take only a few days.
- Now you must begin the prescribed quarantine treatments. You can probably complete these within a week or less. (See PHM factsheet 3.)
- You will be required to treat all the plants in your

nursery, which will be expensive. But you must do it. The only exception is if your nursery, like many in Miami-Dade, consists of several separated blocks—the quarantine and required treatments apply only to the block in which PHM was found.

- Persons from whom you have purchased plants and persons to whom you have sold plants will be contacted.
- After you have completed the prescribed treatments DPI will re-inspect your nursery.
- If you are found not to have PHM, the quarantine on your nursery is lifted.
- You will be re-inspected periodically, but definitely every 30 days (a period based on the life cycle of PHM).
- PHM was earlier found in two nurseries, one is north Miami-Dade and one in the Homestead area.
- Both nurseries have been removed from quarantine because no PHM were found after the prescribed treatments were completed.
- The present policy for infestations anywhere except in a nursery is to release parasitoids and not use chemical pesticides. These parasitoids have been shown to reduce the PHM population by as much as 98%, well below economically significant levels.
- The goal is zero tolerance of PHM in nurseries. This is necessary if our industry is to survive.
- The infestation of PHM in north Miami-Dade neighborhoods has continued to spread.
- Parasitoids have been released periodically since the infestations were discovered, and these releases continue.
- Only USDA-APHIS/FDACS-DPI should release predators. They are rearing the most effective parasitoids. There must be no releases by private citizens of beneficial insects which are available on the open market. This is because those beneficials which are available also feed on the parasitoids being released by USDA/FDACS.

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This fact-sheet contains the most up-to-date information available at the time it was updated (August 6, 2002). Some of this information will change over time. To be sure you are getting the most authoritative and most up-to-date information on PHM visit these web sites:

- <http://miami-dade.ifas.ufl.edu>
- <http://www.mrec.ifas.ufl.edu/lso/mealybugs.htm>

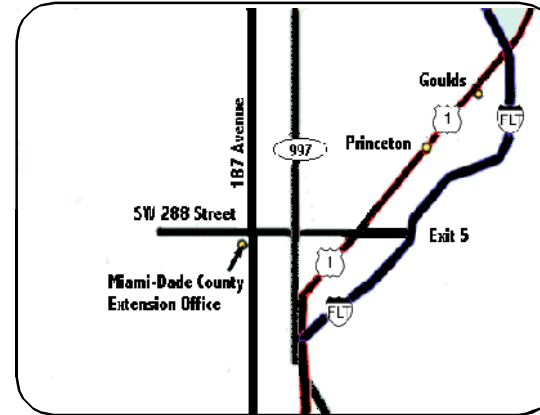
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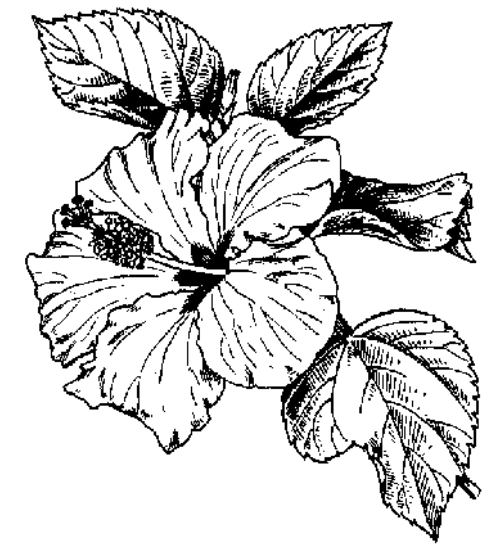
\*\* Previously published in *The grapevine*, newsletter of the Dade Chapter FNCA.

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Miami-Dade County / University of Florida  
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**In Writing**

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