

IPM in the Greenhouse Series

# Using Biocontrol Agents in the Commercial Greenhouse



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Pest control in the commercial greenhouse has evolved from a fairly routine and unimaginative chore to a complex, multifaceted one. Environmental concerns, restricted labeling of pesticides for greenhouse use and pest resistance have caused growers to seek alternative forms of pest management. Integrated pest management (IPM) offers growers alternatives to pesticides for pest control. Total abandonment of pesticides is not the focus of an IPM program. IPM is a holistic approach to managing diseases, insects and mites in the greenhouse. It combines many components, including judicious pesticide usage, that when employed, will decrease pesticide usage. Some of these components include sanitation, cultural practices, scouting, “softer” chemicals, physical barriers, record keeping and biological control agents.

One component of IPM that is receiving increasing attention is the use of biological control agents, also called biocontrol agents. Simply put, a biocontrol agent is any life form used to control or eradicate another. Biocontrol agents used in the greenhouse include insects, mites, bacteria, fungi and nematodes. These bioagents may be predatory, parasitic, pathogenic or work by antibiosis. Predaceous insects and mites function by consuming several prey over the course of their development. They are free living, and the predators are usually as large or larger than their prey (the pest species). Predators may be generalists (feeding on a wide variety of prey) or specialists (feeding on only one or a few related species). Common predators include lady beetles, lacewings, true bugs such as *Podisus* (Spined Soldier Bug) and *Orius* (Minute Pirate Bug),

preying mantids, spiders, midges including *Aphidoletes*, mites such as *Phytoseiulus* and *Amblyseius*, and beneficial nematodes such as *Steinernema carpocapsae*.

True insect parasites are generally much smaller than their hosts. As they develop, parasites usually weaken but rarely kill their hosts. The majority of parasite-like forms being used in biocontrol programs are most appropriately referred to as parasitoids. In contrast to true parasites, many parasitoids are almost the same size as their hosts, and their development always kills the host insect. In contrast to predators, parasitoids develop on or within a single host during the course of their development.

Most parasitoids are highly host-specific, laying their eggs on or into a single developmental stage of only one or a few closely related host species. They are often described in terms of the host stage(s) within which they develop. For example, there are egg parasitoids, larval parasitoids, larval-pupal parasitoids (eggs are laid on or into the larval stage of the host, and the host pupates before it dies), pupal parasitoids and a few species that parasitize adult insects.

The vast majority of parasitoids are small to minute wasps, but a few species of flies and beetles are also parasitoids. Some of the parasitoids/parasitic wasps utilized in greenhouses include *Trichogramma*, *Encarsia*, *Leptomastix*, and *Aphelinus*.

Pathogens (disease causing organisms) such as bacteria, fungi and protozoans can also be used to manage greenhouse pests. These organisms either infect the pests directly or are ingested by the pests. The pests become diseased and stop feeding, fail to reproduce and/or die. *Bacillus thuringiensis*, a bacterial pathogen used to control insects such as leaf feeding Lepidoptera and fungus gnats, and *Nosema locustae*, a protozoan used to control insects such as grasshoppers outside greenhouses, are two examples of pathogenic biocontrol agents. Some fungal biocontrol agents which are incorporated into potting mixes to control soilborne plant pathogens not only parasitize the target fungi but also produce antibiotic compounds that inhibit them and plant pathogenic bacteria. *Gliocladium virens* (GL-21) is a fungal biocontrol agent that has recently become available for greenhouse use.

Many growers try to achieve “zero pest tolerance” by using pesticides. The development of resistance to



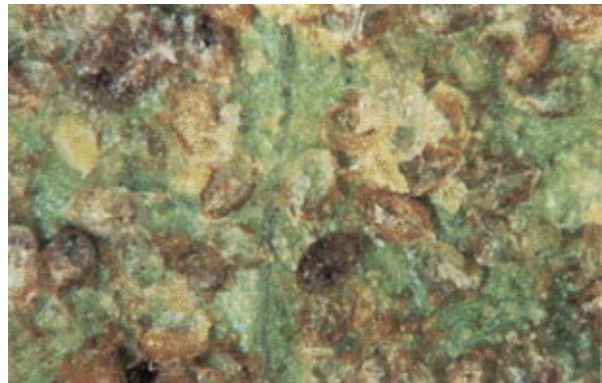
*Amblyseius barkeri*, a predatory mite sold for control of thrips in greenhouses. (Photo by: Marion Herbut)



Enlarged view of *Amblyseius*, predatory mite with thrips.



Enlarged view of *Phytoseiulus persimilis*, a spider mite predator. (Photo by: Jack Scott)



View of sweet potato whitefly pupa parasitized by *Encarsia formosa*. (Photo by: Marion Herbut)



View of greenhouse whitefly pupa parasitized (black) by *Encarsia formosa*.



Greatly enlarged view of *Encarsia formosa*.

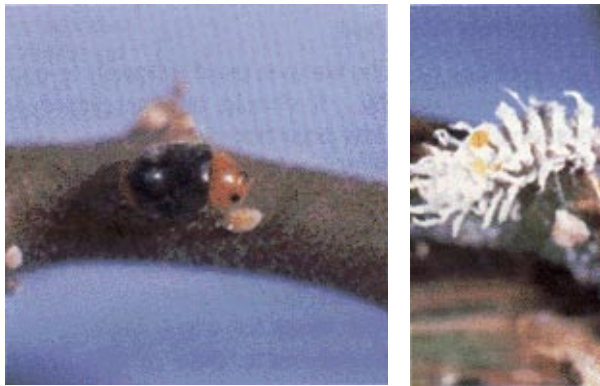




Enlarged view of predatory midge, *Aphidoletes aphidimyza* and aphid.



Tiny parasitic wasp, *Aphidius matricariae*, and parasitized aphids that have turned into hard, brown shells (mummies). Note holes/flaps at rear of mummies where the wasps have emerged.



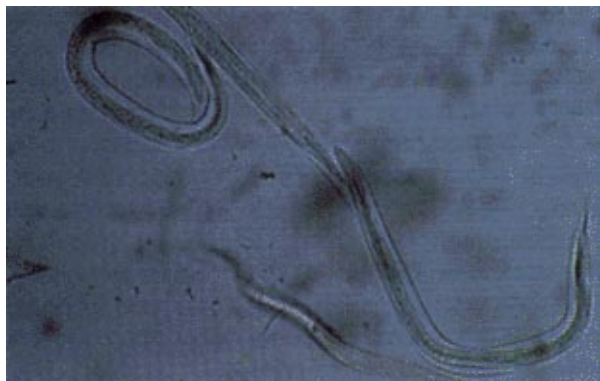
Adult mealybug destroyer, *Cryptolaemus montrouzieri*, and enlarged view of the larva of this lady beetle. Note how much the larva resembles a mealybug.



Parasitic wasp, *Metaphycus helvolus*, that has been used to control some species of scale insects.



Parasitic nematodes, *Steinernema carpocapsae*. Shows size relationship to infected black vine weevil larva.



Enlarged view of *Steinernema carpocapsae*.

pesticides within a traditional chemical control program is making this less of a possibility. Growers should be aware that zero pest tolerance is not practical using biocontrol agents; however, pest populations can be kept below economic thresholds. Once the biocontrol agents are well established, outbreaks rarely occur because the agents and pests are in balance at low levels. If the pest population becomes too low or is eradicated, biocontrol agents starve or move on and must be replaced.

The choice of which biocontrol agent to use depends upon the pest present. Most biocontrol agents are very host specific and cannot be used as a "broad spectrum" treatment. Knowing which pests are present and their populations are the keys to a successful program (refer to OSU Circular E-909, "Commercial Greenhouse Pests"). Therefore, scouting and monitoring for pests on a routine schedule is necessary. Employees must be able to identify both pest and biocontrol agent in all life stages and estimate population changes through the use of indicator plants and sticky traps. Detailed records must be gathered to make pest management decisions. For more information about scouting, refer to OSU Extension Facts No. 6711, "Scouting and Monitoring for Pests in the Commercial Greenhouse."

Biocontrol agents should be introduced into a program after all other components are in place—sanitation, scouting, record keeping, etc. A strong commitment of sufficient time and money must be made if biocontrol agents are to be effective. Refer to OSU Extension Facts No. 6710, "Integrated Pest Management for Commercial Greenhouses: A General Overview of IPM Principles and Practices." Purchase biocontrol agents from reputable dealers; for example, many dealers belong to the Association of Natural Biocontrol Producers (ANBP). A selected list of suppliers of biological control organisms is given in Table 1.

A problem that may be encountered when initiating a biocontrol agent regime is the presence of pesticide residues. It is best to start small in an area that has not been treated with residual chemicals, such as a new section or small propagating house. It is better to start small to avoid expensive mistakes. Up to a year is usually needed for most people to learn to manage a biological control program. Start in a greenhouse separated from the rest of the production ranges to avoid infiltration by chemicals, especially fumigants. Table 2 lists the effects of some insecticides and fungicides on biological control agents.

The grower must decide what crop to commit to biocontrol and which biocontrol agent will be needed. Some biocontrol agents can be used successfully together; however, if biocontrol is a new concept in the greenhouse, it might be better to limit biocontrol agents to only one at a time. After deciding which agent to use, educating oneself on its unique requirements is essential. Most suppliers are willing to provide information on

their products and many trade journals have articles about biocontrol agents. Some of the major biocontrol agents now in use are discussed in this fact sheet.

There are several factors to remember when starting a biological control program. Start small; commit one crop or a portion of a large one to biocontrol, and learn along the way. Choose the proper biocontrol agent for the pest present and purchase them from reputable dealers. Learn to identify both pest and agent and their life stages. Use proper scouting and record-keeping techniques. Learn to live with a few "bugs." Zero pest tolerance is not possible (or desirable) with biological control. Above all, be patient; biological control depends upon the development of a balanced system which takes time to evolve. Remember, no single pest control method is 100% effective. This applies to biological as well as chemical pest control. Expecting miracles will only cause disappointment.

### ***Encarsia formosa***

This tiny parasitic wasp is used primarily to control greenhouse whitefly. It should be introduced as a preventative or at low pest population levels for best results. The wasps lay their eggs in the third and fourth instars of whitefly larvae. *Encarsia* are sold as parasitized whitefly pupae stuck to small cards. The cards are easy to hang on plants below the canopy, out of direct sunlight. Release rates should average 1 wasp for every 1 to 4 plants per week for 4 to 6 weeks. Higher release rates may be needed for older, and thus larger, plants.

*Encarsia* has also been tried for sweet potato whitefly control but with less success. Release rates are higher, 4 to 5 *Encarsia* per plant for the first 3 weeks, then 1 per plant for 6 weeks. Greenhouse whitefly pupae that have been parasitized turn black, and sweet potato whitefly pupae turn a straw color. When 70 to 80% of the plants contain parasitized pupae, releases may be discontinued.

The wasps do best when daily temperatures exceed 72° F. At lower temperatures, the whiteflies reproduce too fast for the *Encarsia* to control them, so it is not advisable to release them when day temperatures are below 72° F and the night temperatures are below 59° F, as often is the case in winter. April releases have been successful for some growers. *Encarsia* lay more eggs in bright light; however, sodium halide lights may kill *Encarsia* that fly into them. The wasps tend to migrate to drier parts of the greenhouse. *Encarsia* are readily available from numerous suppliers. To check viability of the wasps, a small portion of each shipment should be set aside in small containers, such as sealed plastic bags or yogurt cups, and emergence observed.

### ***Delphastus pusillus***

Another biocontrol agent effective against whiteflies is *Delphastus pusillus*. Both the larvae and adults

**Table 1. A Selected List of Suppliers of Biological Control Agents\***

Applied Bio-Nomics Ltd. 11074 West Saanich Rd Sidney, British Columbia Canada V8L 3X9 604-656-2123 HM,PP,AA,CM,EF,HC,OT	Buena Biosystems PO Box 4008 Ventura CA 93007 805-525-2525 PP,CM,Cvs,HC,OT	Nature's Control PO Box 35 Medford OR 97501 503-899-8318 FAX 503-899-9121 PP,SC,AA,CM,Cvs,OT
Beneficial Insectary 14751 Oak Run Rd Oak Run CA 96069 916-472-3715 PP,SC,EF,Cvs,OT	Foothill Ag Research, Inc. 510 W Chase Dr Corona CA 91720 714-371-0120 PP,CM,Cvs,EF,HC,OT	Plant Sciences, Inc. (KOPPERT) 342 Green Valley Rd Watsonville CA 95076 408-728-7771 FAX 408-728-4967 PP,AA,CM,Cvs,EF,OT
Bio-Agronomics PO Box 1013 Clovis CA 93613 209-297-9288 PP,HC,OT	Gardens Alive! 5100 Schenley Lawrenceburg IN 47025 812-623-3800 BT,PP,SC,Cvs,EF,HC,OT	PRAXIS PO Box 360 2723 116 Ave Allegan MI 49010 616-637-2793 HM,PP,SC,AA,DP,OT
Bio Ag Services 4218 W Muscat Fresno CA 93706 209-268-2835 PP,CM,OT	Garden-Ville of Austin 6266 Hwy 290 W Austin TX 78735 512-892-0002 SC,Cvs,HC,OT	Rincon-Vitova Insectaries, Inc. PO Box 95 Oak View CA 93022 805-643-5407 800-248-2847 HM,PP,SC,AA,EF,HC,OT
Bio Ag Supply 710 South Columbia Plainview TX 79072 806-293-5861 FAX 806-296-0431 SC,AA,CM,Cvs,EF,HC,OT	Hydro-Gardens, Inc. PO Box 9707 Colorado Spgs CO 80932 800-634-6362 PP,SC,AA,CM,Cvs,EF,OT	The Beneficial Insect Company 244 Forrest St Fort Mill SC 29715 803-547-2301 PP,SC,CM,Cvs,EF,HC,OT
Biofac, Inc. PO Box 87 Mathis TX 78368 512-547-3259 OT	IPM Laboratories Main St Locke NY 13092-0099 315-497-3129 PP,SC,AA,CM,Cvs,EF,OT	Tri-Cal Biosystems PO Box 1327 Hollister CA 95024 408-637-0195 HM,PP,SC,AA,CM,EF,HC,OT
Biotactics Inc. 22412 Pico St Grand Terrace CA 92324 714-783-2148 FAX 714-681-7915 PP,OT	M & R Durango, Inc. PO Box 886 Bayfield CO 81122 800-526-4075 FAX 303-259-3857 SC,CM,OT	Unique Insect Control 5504 Sperry Dr Citrus Heights CA 95621 916-961-7945 PP,SC,CM,Cvs,EF,HC,OT
Bozeman Bio-Tech Box 3146 Bozeman MT 59772 406-587-5891 PP,SC,Cvs,EF,HC,OT	Natural Pest Controls 8864 Little Creek Dr Orangevale CA 95662 916-726-0855/also FAX PP,SC,CM,Cvs,EF,HC,OT	

## Key to Beneficial Organisms:

AA = *Aphidoletes aphidimyza*  
Cvs = *Chrysoperla* species  
HC = *Hippodamia convergens*  
PP = *Phytoseiulus persimilis*

BT = *Bacillus thuringiensis*  
DP = *Delphastus pusillus*  
HM = *Hypoaspis miles*  
SC = *Steinernema carpocapsae*

CM = *Cryptolaemus montrouzieri*  
EF = *Encarsia formosa*  
OT = Other biocontrol organisms

\* This list is only a selected list of suppliers of beneficial organisms. Many other reputable dealers are available.

**Table 2. Toxicity of Selected Pesticides Against Biological Control Organisms<sup>1</sup>**

Key: H = Harmful; M = Moderately Safe; S = Safe; - = No Data Available

Pesticide Trade Name	Pesticide Common Name	Encarsia formosa	Phytoseiulus persimilis	Aphidoletes aphidimyza	Amblyseius mckenziei	Chrysoperla carnea
<b>INSECTICIDES/MITICIDES</b>						
Ambush	permethrin	H	H	H	H	M
Avid	abamectin	M	M	M	M	
Bladafum	sulfotepp	H	H	-	-	-
DDVP	dichlorvos	H	H	H	H	H
Diazinon	diazinon	H	H <sup>2</sup>	H	H	H
Dibrom	naled	H	H	H	H	-
Dipel	B.T.	S	S	S	S	S
Dursban	chlorpyrifos	H	H	-	-	-
Dycarb	bendiocarb	H	H	-	-	-
Enstar	kinoprene	S	-	-	-	-
Gnatrol	B.T.	S	S	S	S	S
Kelthane	dicofol	H	H	-	-	M
Lindane	lindane	H	H <sup>3</sup>	-	-	-
M-Pede	insect. soap	H	H	H	H	-
Malathion	malathion	H	H	-	-	H
Margosan-O	azadirachtin	S	S	-	-	-
Orthene	acephate	H	H	-	-	-
Pentac	dienochlor	H <sup>2</sup>	H <sup>2</sup>	H <sup>2</sup>	H <sup>2</sup>	-
Sunspray	petroleum oil	H	H	-	-	-
Thiodan	endosulfan	H	H	-	-	M
Vendex	fenbutatin-oxide	S	S	S	S	-
<b>FUNGICIDES</b>						
Agri-Mycin	streptomycin	S	S	S	S	-
Bravo	chlorothalonil	S	S	S	S	-
Chipco 26019	iprodione	M <sup>2</sup>	M <sup>2</sup>	S	S	-
Dithane	mancozeb	S	H <sup>2</sup>	S	S	-
Karathane	dinocap	M	S	M	-	-
Kocide	fixed copper	S	S	S	S	-
Orthocide	captan	S	H <sup>2</sup>	S	S	-
Maneb	maneb	S	S	S	S	-
Subdue	metalaxyl	S	S	S	S	-
Sulfur	sulfur	S <sup>4</sup>	S <sup>4</sup>	S <sup>4</sup>	S <sup>4</sup>	-
Truban	etrizazole	S	S	S	S	-

1. This list is intended as a guide, and is not a recommendation for use. It is not a complete list of chemicals registered for greenhouse use.
2. Some sources list this chemical as safe for this biocontrol organism.
3. Some sources list this chemical as moderately safe for this biocontrol organism.
4. Safe when applied as a fumigant.

of this small black lady beetle feed on whitefly eggs, larvae and adults. It should be used in conjunction with *Encarsia*. It has been effective against *Bemisia tabaci*, the sweet potato whitefly. Availability, however, is limited.

### ***Phytoseiulus persimilis***

This predatory mite is widely available for the control of spider mites. They are shipped mixed with vermiculite or bran. Check quality by shaking some vermiculite on white paper and looking for tiny orange

mites moving around. Better results are generally obtained using locally produced predators, as these often arrive in better condition than imported ones due to shorter shipping time.

Care must be taken when releasing the *Phytoseiulus*. Sprinkle vermiculite on every infested leaf. Order enough for one mite per infested leaf. They become established in the crop in about one week. Beneficial mites prefer moderate temperatures and humid conditions (60-90% relative humidity).

Spider mites have been successfully controlled by releasing 10 predators per plant. *Phytoseiulus* has also

been used on *Gypsophila* (Baby's Breath) and has been effective from two to seven months.

Exercise care when using miticides near *Phytoseiulus*. Abamectin (Avid®) will indirectly kill beneficial mites that feed on treated spider mites.

Other beneficial mites that are available include: *Phytoseiulus longipes*, *Amblyseius californicus* and *Galendromus occidentalis*. Each of these species is suited to a different environmental condition that should be considered when ordering. For example, *Phytoseiulus persimilis* does best in fairly humid conditions under 85° F. There is a strain of *P. persimilis* adapted to high temperatures that tolerate temperatures over 100° F with lower humidity. *P. longipes* can handle temperatures over 100° F and has the lowest relative humidity requirement of commercially available predatory mites—40% at 70° F (higher relative humidity required at higher temperatures). *Amblyseius californicus* tolerates slightly warmer temperatures than *Phytoseiulus persimilis* with lower relative humidity requirements. Most dealers are willing to assist growers in selecting the proper biological control agent for their greenhouse environment.

### ***Steinernema (=Neoaplectana) carpocapsae***

These beneficial nematodes attack numerous insects in the soil. A moist environment and appropriate application rates are the two main requirements for success. The nematodes can be supplied in a spray concentrate or a moist granular carrier. A smaller hybrid strain of *Steinernema* is especially suited to the warmer environment of the greenhouse. Apply 70,000 per sq. ft. of soil surface, preferably in the evening. Some growers apply them using injector systems or diluting them with water and using a pump sprayer, hose-end sprayer, watering can or pail. They will survive in oxygen-rich water, such as produced by nutrient film technique systems, but may “drown” if left in standing water for more than a few hours.

### ***Amblyseius cucumeris* and *A. barkeri* (=mckenziei)**

These thrips predators are widely available. They are tan-orange mites that are similar in appearance to spider mites. They prey on Western flower, onion, broad and cyclamen thrips. They are best used as a preventative measure in ornamentals, before any evidence of thrips occurs. They prey only on the larval stages of the thrips, and they cannot control an established thrips population.

These predators are relatively inexpensive. They are received in containers of loose bran which is easily sprinkled on the foliage of the plant. A suggested release rate is 10 to 100 per m<sup>2</sup> weekly. Other sources suggest an introduction rate of one predator per ft<sup>2</sup>,

followed on a monthly schedule.

*Amblyseius* spp. perform best in warm, dry weather. They enter diapause and are not effective between September and March unless night temperatures remain above 70°F.

### ***Hippodamia convergens***

Both the adult and immature ladybug (ladybird) beetles feed on aphids and spider mites. Ladybugs do not always provide successful, long-term control; however, they are useful to “knock down” an infestation. Availability is good, except during the early summer months when supplies may be sold out.

Ladybugs may be kept in the refrigerator for several weeks and released one handful at a time. They are usually thirsty when released, so plants should be misted prior to release. Since ladybugs have a strong dispersal instinct, spraying them with diluted soda pop will cause their wings to stick together and keep them from flying. Releasing them in the evening is also helpful.

### ***Aphidoletes aphidimyza***

*Aphidoletes aphidimyza* is a predatory midge commonly known as the aphid predator. The tiny orange larvae of this predator attack and kill aphids. The adults resemble tiny mosquitoes. They are effective against many species of aphids, but not against the melon aphid.

The midges are shipped in the pupal stage, mixed in either small bags of vermiculite or peat moss. Cut a one inch hole in the top of the bag and place it at the base of an aphid-infested plant. Keep the vermiculite or peat damp but not saturated. Adults will emerge in seven to ten days. Adults fly at night and lay eggs in aphid colonies. Since only the larval stage attacks aphids, overlapping generations must be maintained. Repeat the application in two weeks. Suggested release rate is one cocoon per 10 ft<sup>2</sup> of greenhouse or a target level of 1 larvae per 15 to 20 aphids.

Short days will cause *A. aphidimyza* to enter diapause. Lighting with 80 to 100-watt bulbs at night will prevent diapause. The optimum temperature for the midge is 73° F.

This predator works especially well on long season crops such as lilies, roses and chrysanthemums and in greenhouses with in-ground beds or gravel floors because it pupates in the soil.

### ***Cryptolaemus montrouzieri***

This beneficial lady beetle is known as the mealybug destroyer or mealybug predator. It prefers warm temperatures (72-77° F) and is not effective during the winter months. The adult and larva are predaceous and attack mealybugs and scales. Release rates vary with pest population, approximately 2 per m<sup>2</sup> or 2 to 5 per

infested plant. Release at various infestation sites. Repeat releases may be necessary. Citrus mealybugs may also be controlled by *Leptomastix dactylopii*. This parasitic wasp prefers sunny environments with warm temperatures of 74 to 80° F. Control takes one to three months.

### ***Chrysoperla (=Chrysopa) carnea* and *C. rufilabris***

Lacewings are generalist predators. They will attack almost any soft-bodied insect. They are best known for attacking aphids and each larva can kill 30 to 50 aphids per day. In some species adults are predaceous, while in other species only the larvae are predaceous. Only the larvae of the two species commonly available, *Chrysoperla carnea* and *C. rufilabris*, are predaceous.

Lacewings are usually shipped in the egg stage, packed in bran or rice hulls. At 80° F they will hatch in about four days. They hatch with a voracious appetite and will often resort to cannibalism if no other food source is available. They will attack and eat other biological control agents. Each larva will feed for about three weeks, pupate and emerge as an adult about one week later.

### ***Hypoaspis (=Geolaelaps) miles***

The nymphs and adults of this inconspicuous brown soil mite are voracious predators of fungus gnat larvae. They will also eat thrips pupae in the soil. This predator is widely available. They are shipped in vermiculite and should not be cooled before application, but stored at room temperature.

*Hypoaspis* has a short life cycle and reproduces quickly; therefore, only a few per plant are needed. One quart will treat 500 to 1000 ft<sup>2</sup> of growing area. Apply 1/4 teaspoon to every other plant. Only one application is needed, but if plant materials are shipped out and replaced regularly, weekly or monthly treatments are advisable. Vermiculite containing mites should be sprinkled directly on the media, over flats, plug trays, capillary mats and floors. The mites are compatible with *Steinernema carpocapsae* (beneficial nematodes) and with most pesticides, except insecticidal drenches. Mites should be applied while fungus gnat populations are low.

### ***Bacillus thuringiensis***

*Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) is a bacterial pathogen which has been formulated into a number of "microbial insecticides." Most Bt strains are highly effective for control of leaf feeding Lepidoptera. Recently, a new strain has been developed for control of fungus gnat larvae. Since it is a larvicide, it will not immediately reduce adult populations. This product is sold under the brand name Gnatrol®.

Gnatrol® should be applied three times, one week apart. Apply as a soil drench, two to eight teaspoons per gallon of water. Saturate soil to a depth of at least two inches. Bt has a long shelf life.

Bt products are exceptionally safe and have specific activity, which make them compatible with biological control agents.

### ***Gliocladium virens***

*Gliocladium virens* (GL-21) is a beneficial fungus that can be incorporated in the growing media to suppress the major fungal genera (*Pythium* and *Rhizoctonia*) responsible for damping-off diseases of greenhouse crops. Available under the name GL-21 Microbial Fungicide®, it is non-toxic to people or other beneficial organisms. There are no reentry requirements, handling risks or chemical odor from plants treated with GL-21. Available in a prilled form, it is incorporated uniformly into the soil or soilless growing media. Prills should be added at a rate of 1 to 1.5 lbs. per cubic yard of growing media. Incubate one to two days before seeding or transplanting. It is important that the prills be uniformly incorporated into the media to provide the best performance possible.

### **Conclusions**

Biological control agents are an important part of integrated pest management systems. Their use must be coordinated with other types of pest management, chemical and mechanical. Care must be taken when considering which agents to utilize. Pest species must be carefully identified; pest populations must be low enough so that bioagents are not overwhelmed; temperature, humidity and lighting of the greenhouse must be considered; and previous pesticide usage must be taken into account before biocontrol agents are introduced. Strict attention to these requirements will help make integrated pest management a reality in the commercial greenhouse.

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