

NATURAL PEST AND DISEASE CONTROL

What is natural pest and disease control?

Pests and diseases are part of the natural environmental system. In this system there is a balance between predators and pests. This is nature's way of controlling populations. The creatures that we call pests and the organisms that cause disease only become 'pest and diseases' when their activities start to damage crops and affect yields.

If the natural environmental system is imbalanced then one population can become dominant because it is not being preyed upon. The aim of natural control is to restore a balance between pest and predator and to keep pests and diseases down to an acceptable level. The aim is not to eradicate them altogether, as they also have a role to play in the natural system.

Once a pest or disease has started to attack a crop, the damage cannot be repaired and control becomes increasingly difficult. Where possible, use techniques to avoid or prevent pest and disease attack in the first place.

Methods of Pest and Disease Control

- A healthy soil
- A healthy crop
- Resistant varieties
- Rotation
- Good hygiene
- Soil tillage
- Soil pH
- Timely sowing
- Companion planting
- Plants to attract predators and parasites
- Barriers
- Traps
- Light traps
- Fly traps
- Hand picking
- Biological control
- Natural pesticides
- Social prevention

Why is natural control preferable to chemical control?

Pesticides do not solve the pest problem. In the past 50 years, insecticide use has increased tenfold, while crop losses from pest damage have doubled. Here are three important reasons why natural control is preferable to pesticide use.

Cost

Using natural pest and disease control is often cheaper than applying chemical pesticides because natural methods do not require buying expensive materials from the outside. Products and materials which are already in the home and around the farm are most often used.

Safety for people

There is much concern over the dangers of chemical products. They may be misused because the instructions are not written in the language spoken by the person using the product. There have been many reports of people suffering from severe skin rashes and headaches as a result of using chemical pesticides. There are an estimated one million cases of poisoning by pesticides each year around the world. Up to 20,000 of these result in death. Most of the deaths occur in developing countries where chemical pesticides, which are banned in Europe or the USA, are still available.

Safety for the environment

Pests are often controlled with man made chemicals which have many harmful effects, for example:

- Artificial chemicals kill useful insects which eat pests.
- Artificial chemicals can stay in the environment and in the bodies of animals causing problems for many years.
- Artificial products are very simple chemicals and insect pests can very quickly, over a few breeding cycles, become resistant to them and can no longer be controlled.

Knowing the problem

Before taking action to control pests and diseases it is very important to make sure that the problem is correctly identified. Only then can you hope to succeed. Knowledge of pests and diseases will help you to decide whether the problem is caused by a pest, a disease, a mineral deficiency in the soil or an environmental factor. A good identification book may help with this.

Proper identification should be the first step in controlling the problem and, more importantly, in preventing it from happening again.

The following pages describe a general approach to natural pest and disease control and give some specific examples.

A healthy soil

A soil managed using organic methods will give plants a balanced food supply. Plants which are fed well, like people, will be much more resistant to pest and disease. So caring for the soil is important. It should be managed in ways that develop and protect its structure, its fertility and also the millions of creatures for which it is a home. Caring for the soil involves providing a regular input of organic residues in the form of animal manures and plant remains. The aim is to:

- Maintain levels of humus (organic material) that give structure to the soil
- Feed organisms which live in the soil
- Provide nutrients for crops

Whilst chemical fertilizers appear to improve plant growth, their use can also have negative effects. A plant may look healthy but, because of the high content of nitrogen given by the chemical fertilizer, causing fast sappy growth, it is very attractive to pests. It has been observed that aphids lay double the number of eggs on a plant grown with chemical fertilizers compared to organically grown plants.

A healthy crop

By giving plants the right growing conditions they will be more able to resist pests and diseases. Also, the right choice of crop will help to deter pests and disease. A crop growing in an area where it is not suited is more likely to be attacked. You should take account of the soil type, the climate, the altitude, the available nutrients and the amount of water needed when selecting your crops. Plants will only yield well and resist pests and diseases if they are grown under the most suitable conditions for that particular plant.

To help ensure a healthy crop, weeding should be done early and regularly to stop weeds from taking nutrients which should be going to the crop.

Resistant varieties and genetic diversity

Within a single crop there can be many differences between plants. Some may be tall, some may be able to resist particular diseases.

There is most variety in the traditional crops grown by farmers. These have been grown and selected over many centuries to meet the requirements of the farmer. Although many of these are being replaced by modern varieties, seeds are often still saved locally.

Crops which have been bred by modern breeding methods tend to be very similar and if one plant is susceptible to a disease, all the other plants are as well. Although some new modern varieties may be very resistant to specific pests and diseases they are often less suited to the local climate and soil conditions than traditional varieties. It can therefore be dangerous to rely too much on any one of them.

A wide variety or "genetic diversity" between the plants within a single crop is important. This helps the crop to resist pests and diseases and acts as an insurance against crop failure in unusual weather such as drought or flood. It is important to remember this when choosing which crops to grow.

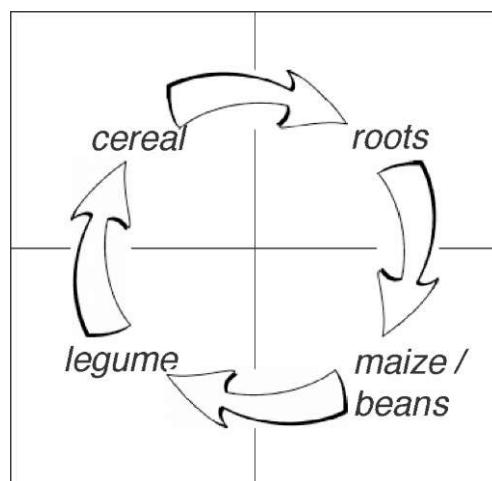
Crop rotation

Growing the same crops in the same site year after year can encourage a build up of pests and diseases in the soil. These will transfer from one crop to the next. Crops should be moved to a different area of land each year, and not returned to the original site for several years. For vegetables a 3 to 4 year rotation is usually recommended as a minimum.

Crop rotation also helps a variety of natural predators to survive on the farm.

A typical 4 year rotation would include a cycle with maize and beans, a cereal and a root crop with either of the following;

1. Grass or bush fallow (a fallow period where no crops are grown).
2. A legume crop where a green manure, which is a plant grown mainly for the benefit of the soil, is grown.



Crop rotation helps to control pests and diseases

With crops such as brassicas and onions which are usually grown in a vegetable garden the whole year round, the populations of certain pests and diseases can keep increasing because there is always a suitable

host plant for them. Breaking the cycle can help to solve the problem. This can be done through rotation within the vegetable garden.

Good hygiene

If infected plant material, live or dead, is left lying around, pests and diseases can be passed on to future crops. Debris should be cleared up and disposed of. This can be done by composting the debris. The composting process will kill some pests and diseases and produce compost which is a good soil improver and fertilizer. Some diseases may survive being composted. If in doubt, the infected material should be burnt.

Soil tillage

Many pests spend part of their lives as larvae or pupae in the soil. Ploughing or digging when the soil is dry can reveal the pest and they will dry out and die in the sun, or they can be picked off the ground by hand or birds or other predators. Ploughing can also push the pest deep down into the ground where they will not be able to survive. Ploughing and disturbing the soil should be carefully considered against the harmful effects it may have such as destroying the structure of the soil and causing soil erosion.

Soil pH

The pH (acidity or alkalinity) of a soil can affect some diseases. Changing the pH can reduce the problem.

For example, potato scab is less severe in more acid (pH below 7) soils. A layer of grass mowings added to the bottom of the potato trenches at planting time will make the soil more acid and reduce the disease.

Clubroot is less severe in alkaline conditions (pH above 7) therefore liming the soil to make it more alkaline can reduce the problem.

Timely sowing

It is often the young of many pests (larvae, caterpillar), rather than the adults, that cause damage to crops. Problems can be avoided by delaying sowing until the egg laying period of a pest is over, or by protecting the plants during this period. It is therefore important to know the life cycle of pests, so that timely sowing can be carried out.

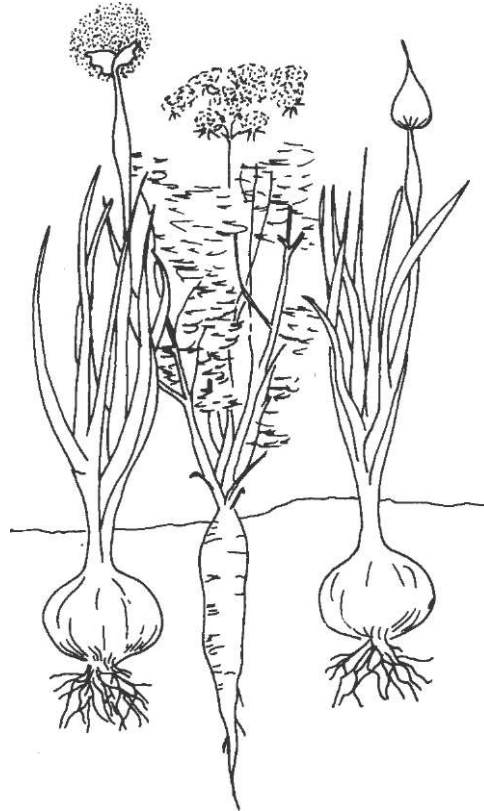
In Ghana, for example, farmers in the forest zone only plant maize in the main rainy season. In the lesser rainy season, the maize is attacked by stem borers.

Companion planting

Companion planting means growing certain plants to protect other plants from pests or diseases. This may be because the pest is deterred by the companion plant, or because it is attracted to the companion plant rather than the crop.

For example onions planted either side of a row of carrots help to deter carrot flies. You need to sow 4 rows of onions for 1 row of carrots. This effect will only last as long as the onions are growing leaves. Many pests avoid garlic, so this can be used very effectively for companion planting with most crops.

Growing onions with carrots to help deter carrotfly



Plants to attract predators and parasites

Similarly to companion planting, which seeks to deter pests from the main crop, attractant plants can be grown to attract predatory insects.

Areas of natural habitat

Bushes and trees are a home for many useful insects and birds. They provide resting areas, shelter and food. Areas of natural habitat can be left around the edges of fields where crops are grown. If these areas are destroyed then there is likely to be an imbalance between the populations of predator and pest.

Specific plants to attract beneficial insects

There are many plants that can be grown to attract natural predators and parasites which will help to keep down pests and diseases.

Flowers such as marigolds (*Tagetes*), mint (*Mentha*), sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*), sunhemp (*Crotalaria juncea*) as well as local legumes are useful attractant plants. Hoverflies, whose larvae feed on greenfly are attracted to the flowers of herbs and vegetables such as fennel, celery, dill, carrots and parsnips (*Umbelliferae* family). The nectar and pollen that these flowers provide will help to increase the number of eggs that these insects lay. Umbellifers will also provide food to various parasitic wasps whose young live on aphids and some caterpillars.

Red hot pokers (*Kniphofia uvaria*) are used in parts of Africa to attract birds that eat aphids.

Barriers

Barriers are physical structures put in place to prevent a pest from reaching a plant. They keep pests away from a plant but do not kill them. Here are some examples that you can adapt, depending on the resources available to you:

Crawling insects

Cut the top off a transparent plastic bottle and place it firmly into the ground, over a young plant. This stops pests such as slugs from reaching the plant.



Using an old plastic bottle to protect a young plant

Climbing insects

To help protect trees from attack by insects, grease bands can be used. Wrap a piece of plastic or a long leaf around the trunk of the tree. Spread any kind of thick grease on top of this. Fold over the top of the foil or plastic to form an overhang to protect the grease from being washed away by rain. Check the grease every week to ensure that the grease is intact. This prevents crawling insects such as ants, fruit fly larvae, slugs, snails, beetles or caterpillars from damaging trees, especially fruit trees, or grain stores.

Termites

Digging a 70-100cm trench around buildings and nurseries can prevent attack from subterranean species of termites. This is a good method of control however it is hard work. Alternatively, barriers can be built. These should be partially above and below ground and should be made from material that is impenetrable to termites such as basalt, sand or crushed volcanic cinders. Particle size of the material is critical, they should not be too large for the termites to carry away, and not so small that termites can pack the particles to create a continuous passage through which they can move

Bait traps

The use of baits and traps are traditional methods which have become neglected because of the increasing use of chemical pesticides. Here are some examples:

Cutworms

Method one

Mix equal quantities of hardwood sawdust, bran, molasses and enough water to make the solution sticky. Spread around the base of the plants in the evenings. The molasses attract the cutworms and as they try to pass through it they get stuck. The substance dries out in the sun and the pest dies.

Method two

Mix 100 grams (g) of bran, 10g of sugar, 200g of water, 5g of pyrethrum powder. Spread around the base of the plants. The cutworms eat the substance and die.



Spread bait around the base of plants to trap cutworms

Fruit fly

Traps need to be put in place before an attack is likely to start. For fruit fly, the traps should be baited 6 to 8 weeks before the fruit ripen.

Here are two examples of trap constructions which could be adapted:

Method one

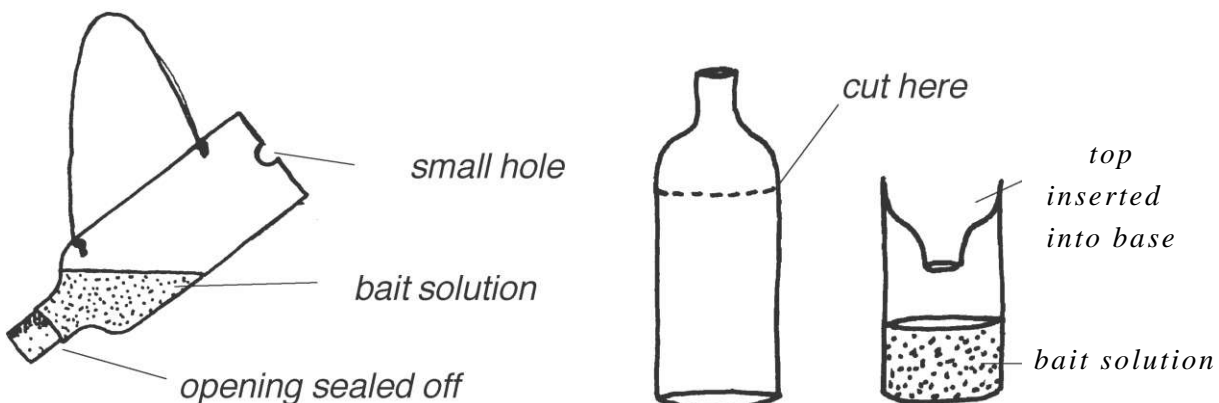
Make a small hole in the bottom of a plastic bottle or container. Seal the top of the bottle with a lid or stopper. Fill one quarter of the bottle with the bait. Hang the bottle upside down from trees around fields or gardens. The flies are attracted to the bait through the small hole. They are then trapped and drown in the bait.

Method two

Cut the top of a plastic bottle off. Pour some bait in the bottom half of the bottle. Turn the top half of the bottle upside down and place in the bottom half. Again the flies are attracted into the bottle and drown in the bait.

Here are two different baits for fruit fly that can be poured into the traps:

- Mix 1 litre of water, 250 millilitres (ml) of urine, a few drops of vanilla essence, 100g of sugar and 10g of pyrethrum powder.
- Mix 1 teaspoon of pyrethrum powder, 250g of honey, a few drops of vanilla essence, 250g of orange or cucumber peel or pulp and 10 litres of water.



Method one

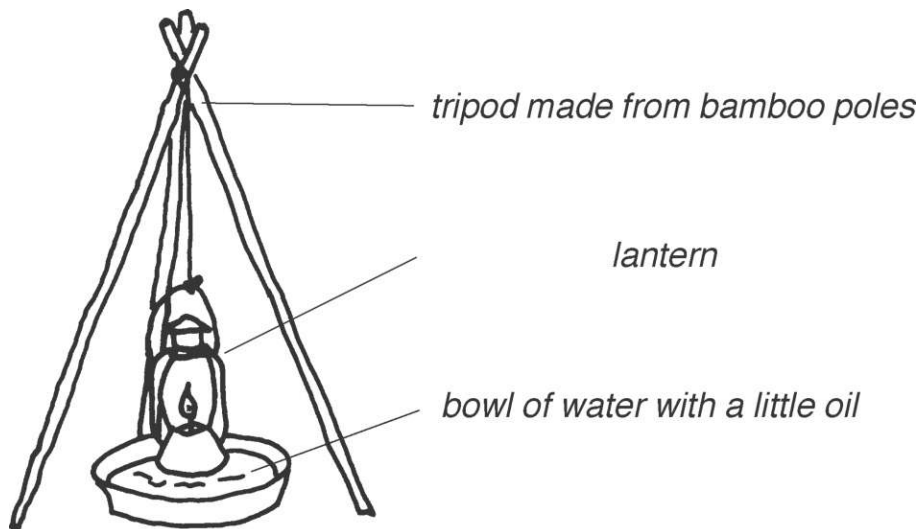
Method two

Examples of fruit fly traps filled with bait

Light traps

Light traps are set up at night and attract a variety of flying insects including moths, mosquitoes, chafer beetles, american bollworms, army worms, cutworms, brown rice plant hopper, green rice leaf hopper, rice black bugs, rice gall midges, rice stem borers and tomato hornworms.

Make a tripod construction from wooden poles or bamboo. Press the poles down firmly into the ground to secure it so that it cannot be blown over or knocked down by animals. Suspend a lantern from the top of the construction over a bowl of water with a little oil in it.



Example of a light trap

Fire risks must be kept in mind and the lamps must be hung so that the wood does not catch fire.

The best timing for placing light traps around a garden or field, depends on the life cycle of the insect and the development stage of the crop. The best time is just after the moths emerge but before they lay eggs, so it is important to know the life cycle of the pests.

Fly trap

Fly traps are large boards measuring about 30cm by 30cm which are painted bright yellow/orange and covered with an adhesive such as oil or glue. Different pests are attracted to different colours so you need to experiment. The flies are attracted to the bright colour of the board and fly onto it. They get stuck in the oil or glue and die.

For example, leaf minors are attracted to yellow, so place several yellow boards 60cm off the ground (on a table or hung from a tree). The board will attract a huge number of insects, which means a considerable reduction of pests.

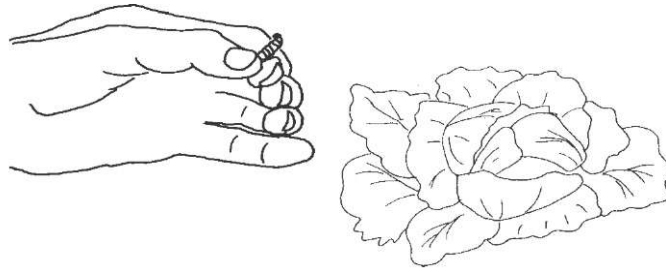
Pheromone traps

Pheromone is the sexual attractant produced by some female insects. If a trap is baited with this it will attract the male insects into the trap from which they cannot escape. Pheromone traps alone can reduce pest damage. Alternatively they give an indication of pest populations and therefore the best time to apply control methods. Pheromone traps are usually prepared by commercial companies and may be costly to the farmer. However, if you have a particularly severe pest problem it may be worth investing in one rather than using chemical pesticides.

Hand picking and squashing

In some cases it may be possible to pick pests directly off the crops. This can be done especially with caterpillars and other large insects in small plots of land. Smaller pests such as aphids can be squashed on the plant.

Parts of plants that are diseased can be cut or broken off the plants to prevent the spread of the disease.



Handpicking caterpillars from a cabbage plant

Biological control

Biological control means using one creature or organism to control a pest. This often involves introducing a creature or organism, which is known to be predatory, to an area with the aim that it will control the population of the pest.

Some widespread pest and disease problems have been dealt with in this way by government projects. For example, a variety of creatures have been introduced to control the cassava mealy bug in Kenya. Here are other examples of creatures or organisms which are known to control certain pests:

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- Control of Cabbage caterpillars: *Bacillus thuringiensis* is a bacteria which kills many types of caterpillar, but only when they eat it. This bacteria (which can be bought as a commercial product called "Bactospeine") is applied to brassicas (cauliflowers, cabbages) as a spray.
- Control of Vine weevils: Nemasys H is a preparation containing parasitic nematodes which seek out and destroy vine weevil larvae. It is watered onto the soil.

Biological control does not have to involve buying commercial products. It can be achieved on a small-scale by encouraging natural predators to live and breed in the area where pests are a problem. This can be achieved by having trees and hedges around the farm to provide a home for them. There are many insects and animals which should be encouraged because they feed on pests. Here are some examples:

Frogs, toads, hedgehogs, mice, moles, bats, birds, chameleons, lizards, spiders, ants, assassin bugs, black-knee capsids, bees, branchid wasps, parasitic wasps, dung beetles, ground beetles, earthworms, hawk moths, dragon flies, hoverflies, lacewings and stick insects.

Natural pesticides

If pests and diseases cannot be prevented or controlled by cultural and physical means, it may be necessary to use natural pesticides. Many growers have developed ways of making their own sprays from plants such as garlic, chillies, marigolds and many others. These are inexpensive and have proved to be very effective. Here are some examples:

A solution can be made from marigold using water and soap. The liquid acts as a crop strengthener to help potatoes, beans, tomatoes and peas resist blight, mildew and other fungal diseases. It also repels aphids, caterpillars and flies.

Garlic spray is particularly good against army worms, Colorado Beetle, False codling moth, Khapra beetle, Mexican bean beetle and Imported cabbage worm. Garlic can also kill nematodes if soil or batches of soil are drenched with garlic liquid.

Social prevention

It may be necessary to work with surrounding farmers to destroy a pest. For example the variegated grasshopper (*Zonocerus variegatus*), usually has 1 or 2 nests per hectare. These can be destroyed by raking out the eggs from the nest and leaving them in the sun to dry out and die. The nest could be on another farmer's farm but it could affect your crops. Joint action and cooperation between all farmers could considerably reduce infestation.

Reference list

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