

# Bumps on Cactus

By Deborah Birge, Fort Bend Master Gardener

## Q: What are these bumps on my Cactus?

A neighbor recently emailed about a cactus problem. It appears to be oyster shell scale. Scale insects have six legs and appear insect-like only in the “crawler” stage that hatches from the egg. It is the crawler stage that spreads the infestation to the new plant growth and nearby host plants by hitching a ride on animals such as birds, or on clothing or even by being blown by the wind. Once the crawlers settle down, they insert their sucking mouthparts into plant tissue and begin feeding. They generally no longer move and slowly develop to the adult stage. The females weave a silk-like web that hardens into a shell that protects her and her eggs. In some species, winged six-legged males emerge to mate with females. Oyster shell scales are armored scales (Hemiptera: Diaspididae). Adult females appear as round or oval white spots with raised areas on or off the centers. Males can be elongate and white. Their presence is unsightly, and high numbers can stress plants.



**Recommended solution:** This is a difficult scale to control but two different methods are recommended. You can choose the method depending on the amount of work you want to put into it and the number of affected plants you have. And remember, even when killed, dead scales will remain on the cactus pads due to the females’ hard shell.

The first method is the easiest if you just have a few affected plants. Use isopropyl alcohol or rubbing alcohol. For hard skinned cacti use a soft brush such as a nipple brush for a baby bottle or a straw cleaner. If you are treating a succulent or thin-skinned plant, use Q-tips. Dip brush or Q-tip into alcohol and rub the scale. Be gentle on the thin-skinned succulents. As you’ll see, the scale comes off readily. You may have a few stuck in nooks and crannies you can’t remove but just dab on the alcohol to kill them.

The second method is a bit messier. You will need Neem oil, not dormant oil or horticulture oil. Mix the neem as directed on the label, they are all different. Move all affected plants out of the sun for protection. Place an old sheet or some protection underneath your plants. Spray them to saturation with the Neem oil mixture. Keep them out of the sun for 7 days and repeat the process. After another 7 days, spray the plants well with a strong stream of water to remove any residual oil ... some scale may come off also. You can now safely move the plants back to the sun. If you use the oil in the sun your plants will suffer from sunscald and possibly die.

Photo Credit: John Morton