

## Use Sunflowers to Trap Stink Bugs

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Have you pampered your vegetable garden just to be devastated by pests? In this increasingly health-conscious world, garden enthusiasts are striving to be more organic when growing their vegetables for their own plate. Pests make that very difficult, especially when they become harder to kill with the “soft” insecticides. This article will give you a way to rid your garden of the dreaded stink bugs and leaf-footed bugs by using trap crops.



If you grow tomatoes, you have most likely dealt with either stink bugs or leaf-footed bugs. Unfortunately, they also like beans, eggplants, okra, potatoes, strawberries, peaches, and the list goes on and on. Stink bugs are shield-shaped and are often green or brown. Their nymphs are black or light green, depending on the species. Leaf-footed bugs are large dark brown bugs with a cream-colored stripe across their back. Their nymphs are bright red.

These pests damage fruits and vegetables by piercing the plants with their needle-like mouthparts and sucking the sap from the pods, buds, blossoms, and seeds. The extent of the damage depends on the developmental stage of the plant attacked. The fruit and pods may become deformed or appear bruised inside and the seeds may flatten and shrivel. Reducing the population that gets to your treasured crop through trap cropping can keep the damage to a minimum.

Trap cropping is not a new idea. Many growers and gardeners have planted trap crops to protect their main crop from a pest. To be effective, a trap crop has to be more attractive to the pest than the main crop, so it will lure the pest away. Depending on the situation, a trap crop can be different plant species, variety, or just at a different stage of growth than the main crop. Trap crops provide additional benefits including increasing the quality of the crop, attracting beneficial insects, enhancing biodiversity and reducing insecticide use.

The trap crop used at the UF/IFAS Extension Alachua County vegetable demonstration garden to keep the stink bug at bay is sunflowers. The key to using a trap crop is intercepting the bugs before they reach the vegetable or fruit crops. At our small demonstration garden, sunflowers are seeded into large containers around the perimeter of the garden, although they could have easily been planted into the ground.

The sunflower varieties ‘Giganteus’, ‘Titan’, and ‘Mammoth’ are the most effective for attracting the pests. Since the pests are attracted to the flowers, the seeds can be sown in stages to extend the flowering season and protect the vegetables. To protect your vegetables in the early spring, plant triticale, a type of small grain, over several planting dates in October and early November. The bugs will be trapped in it in the early spring while the sunflowers are growing. Other common trap crops include buckwheat, sorghum, and millet.

A trap crop doesn’t mean that they’ll never move onto your crop, so you should destroy the stink bugs and leaf-footed bugs that get on the trap crop. The bugs can be vacuumed off or sprayed with a short-lived insecticide. If you are using an insecticide, apply it at night, if possible, since many beneficial insects, like bees, enjoy the flowers as well and they are tucked away at night.

Trap crops, especially sunflowers, are an easy, organic way to protect your vegetables and fruit from stink bugs and leaf-footed bugs. If you have a vegetable garden, it’s not too late to start your seeds. The local feed and seed stores carry the appropriate sunflower varieties. For more information about using trap crops for this and other pests, check out the article called “Trap Cropping in Vegetable Production: One Tool for Managing Pests” by Southern Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE), <http://www.southernsare.org/>.

The UF/IFAS Extension Alachua County vegetable demonstration garden is open to the public throughout the week. Tours will be available during our Plant Sale and Ag Fest on Saturday, May 21 from 8-12pm. Come check us out.

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