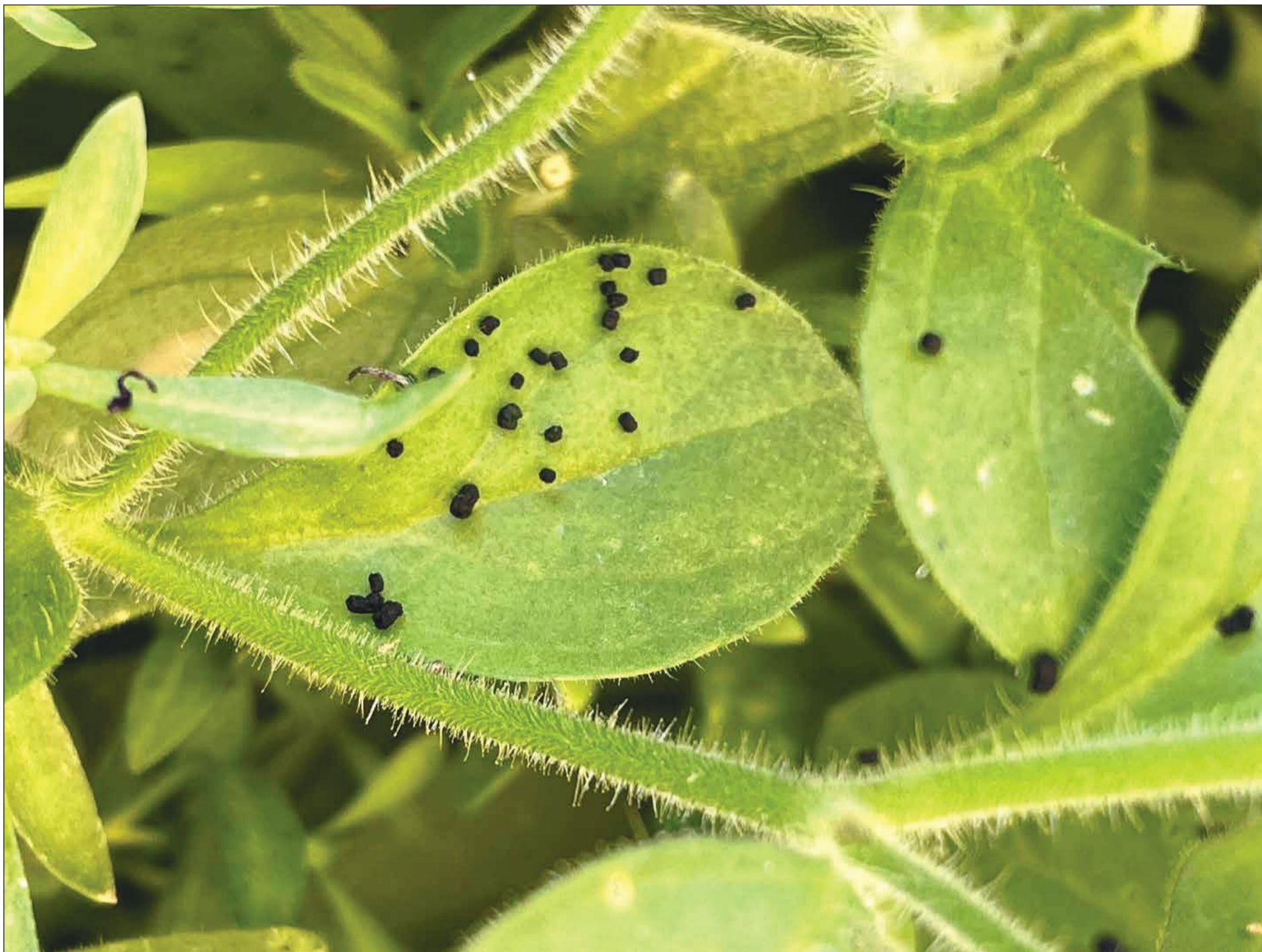


# Beware the tobacco budworm



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JANET BITTER

Deposits of small black dots (aka worm poop) is another indication of budworms feasting on your flowers.



**Janet Bitter**  
Master Gardener

**Q**uestion: Why are my petunia flower buds turning brown before they open?

**A**nswer: I love flowers. It brightens my day to have pots of them around my house, especially those big overflowing baskets of cascading petunias in the summer.

Unfortunately, one of my most despised insect pests also just loves those cascading petunias – the petunia or tobacco budworm.

If you notice your petunias (or geraniums, calibrachoa/million bells, nicotiana and some others to a lesser degree) don't look as full as they used to, it's time for an inspection.

The weird thing about this pest is that your friend who lives a mile away (or even down the street!) may look at you like a deer in headlights when you mention you have budworms on your petunias. Their flower baskets look full and healthy. This pest seems to be present in some areas and not in others.

If you grow containers of flowers and don't replace the soil the next year, there may be overwintering pupae that will welcome the petunia or geranium buffet you set out each spring.

You know the budworms are feasting on your flowers if you observe flowers with holes in some of the petals, buds that turn brown and never open, or deposits of small black



Budworms seems to be present in some areas and not in others. Holes in flower petals is just one indication of this pest.

dots (aka worm poop) on and around your flowers.

You can spot the actual caterpillars if you look carefully around dusk. They tend to feed mostly in the evenings and hide down near the soil level during the day. The worms can be brown or green and anywhere from ½ to 2 inches long. They can be hard to spot, but once you find one you will know what to look for.

The adult female moth lays eggs on flower buds, the worms hatch and begin eating the buds and leaves, then pupate in the soil and start the cycle all over.

Control of these pests takes some persistence. You can hand-pick and destroy worms if you have just a pot or two. Go out in the evening and use a flashlight to locate those munching little worms.

Bacillus thuringiensis (BT) is a naturally

occurring bacteria that causes problems in the stomachs of the caterpillars. The key to using BT (it can be found under several common brand names at most garden centers) is to apply it at dusk when the caterpillars are actively feeding. Make sure you thoroughly cover the flowers, stems and leaves. It has a fairly short shelf-life and should be mixed right before you use it for best results.

The nice thing about BT is it is harmless to people, pets and bees. You will need to apply BT about once a week for several weeks to obtain control. Remember,



Holes in petunia or geranium flower petals are one indication of budworms.

it does not kill the caterpillars on contact – they must ingest it for it to kill them.

Another option to use for control is Spinosad, another natural bacterial product. This product will harm bees, so it must be used when there are no bees in the flowers – evening, for instance. After it has dried, it is safe

for bees.

Spinosad kills the caterpillars on contact, so it is faster-acting than BT. As always, follow label directions when applying any product.

Enjoy growing these beautiful flowers – just keep your eyes out for the dreaded budworms!

*Do you have a gardening*

*or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at [douglasmg@oregonstate.edu](mailto:douglasmg@oregonstate.edu) or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.*