

Diagnosing Plant Problems

Are your tomato plants wilting—but not for lack of water? Has your lawn developed brown spots—but it can't be from too much sun? Is your ground cover thinning and not spreading as expected?

The Home & Garden Information Center (HGIC) of the Maryland Cooperative Extension is a vast network of answers and solutions to many everyday plant problems. Plant or insect questions can be researched and diagnosed through either a telephone call to 1-800-342-2507, or a visit to the website at www.plantdiagnostics.umd.edu/. You can obtain immediate information on fruits and vegetables, annuals and perennials, trees and shrubs, Integrated Pest Management, houseplants, composting and soil testing, wildlife, beneficial organisms and lawns, complete with pictures of possible problems and suggested causes and solutions.

You can also learn to develop diagnostic and decision making skills on your own. With some key suggestions from the HGIC, patient observation and consulting with reliable reference materials, the ability to accurately diagnose a wide range of plant problems can help to keep your landscape and gardens beautiful and productive. It can also prevent expensive removal and replacement of damaged plants.

How to develop this skill?

- ✓ Keep an open mind. Do not jump to conclusions.
- ✓ Avoid assigning “guilt by association”. The insect, animal or disease observed may not be the cause of the problem or symptoms.
- ✓ A “history” of the problem plant is very useful. Extreme weather, site alteration, grade changes, fertilizer, pesticide and herbicide use, cultural practices, etc. influence a plant's relative health over time. For instance, once mature trees start to decline, there is often no way to reverse the process.
- ✓ Consider all factors that influence the plant's growth and health. Check the roots, look under the leaves for potential clues.
- ✓ Know what your plant *should* look like. Knowledge of general growth rate, leaf size and coloration may help alert you to early signs of trouble.
- ✓ At least one half of all observed landscape problems are not caused by insects or diseases. Try to eliminate other causal factors first. Several other factors may be in play: soil drainage, extreme weather from previous years, air pollution, herbicide drift, change in sun exposure, etc.
- ✓ The symptom may indicate a problem in a different part of the plant. For example, leaf yellowing and scorching may be caused by root damage.
- ✓ There is a great variation in the expected life-span of landscape plants. All plants go through periods of growth, maturity and decline. Again, check the general information on the plant. Find out what you *should* expect.
- ✓ Many pests and diseases are plant-specific. Symptoms affecting more than one plant species may indicate cultural and environmental problems.
- ✓ There is no substitute for “hands on” training with an experienced individual, or the comfort of additional answers and information only a phone call or website away!

If you have any gardening questions, you may call the Garrett County Extension Office at 301-334-6960. You can bring plant or insect samples to the Garrett County Office for an extension agent to examine or you may submit samples to the Home and Garden Information Center. Speak with an extension agent or one of the Horticulture Consultants at HGIC (800-342-2507) before sending a sample. A completed Plant and Insect Sample Date Sheet needs to be included with any sample, as well as a \$15.00 fee. The form can be downloaded from the HGIC site, or obtained from the Garrett County Extension Office.

Plant problems can be solved with experience—either your own, or with a little help from the Maryland Cooperative Extension.

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