

Help, I'm Seeing Spots!
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It is that time of the summer when leaf diseases start showing up in strong force on trees, shrubs, vegetables, and fruit plants. These include blights, powdery mildew, rusts, and downy mildew, just to name a few. Should we be overly concerned about these problems right now? My answer is yes and no. This may seem slightly indecisive but there is a definite method to my madness. In order to determine the answer we must ask a few questions. First and foremost we must determine what species we are dealing with and secondly, the size of the spots, as this can affect photosynthesis. Larger spots will block out more light than smaller ones. Are the newer or older leaves more affected? What color are the spots? With these facts involved it is much easier to determine if the leaf disease is going to be a problem in the future.

Many leaf diseases do not seriously harm ornamental plants. In field conditions it can be disastrous, as yield and even harvesting can be greatly affected. But in the home landscape and garden this may not be a concern. Typically the aesthetic value is of greater importance to the homeowner. This is where leaf problems become a big concern. When we look at a plant we see the leaves, if they don't look good our assumption is that something is wrong.

Leaf diseases on deciduous trees and shrubs (those that lose their leaves in the fall) typically do not experience long-term damage. Evergreens, on the other hand, tend to be more affected by leaf diseases as they retain leaves for several years. Leaf diseases on fruits and vegetables can have an impact on yield, which can be a problem.

We can expect some leaf problems by the end of July and early August. The weather is favorable for disease development and plant growth is slowing down to get ready for winter.

Fungicides can be effective against many leaf diseases. Unfortunately, fungicides protect the foliage and do not cure the disease. By the time we see disease starting it is often too late to spray. The best disease prevention is good cultural practices like raking up leaves, removal of diseased leaves and branches, proper fertilization, watering, and insect control. Raking up leaves in the fall will reduce spores next year for many fungal pathogens. Fertilization and watering contribute to the general health of trees and shrubs and insects and diseases tend to attack stressed plants more often. If you take good care of your landscape plants they will in turn treat you right. Remember that leaf spots are common each year for many plants. Take some prevention and you will not have to worry about these problems.

More information on horticultural or agricultural topics can be found by calling the Pennington County Extension office at 605-394-2188 or by emailing me at ricky.abrahamson@sdstate.edu.