

Don't be Fungus-friendly—Clean-up!

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Did you have a lot of fungal problems in your landscape this year? Fungal problems like leaf spots on trees and shrubs, yellowing or browning leaves on garden plants, powdery mildew on perennials?

You're not alone. This summer was a paradise for fungi that cause plant diseases. We had lots of moisture—something fungi need—along with just the right temperatures. This translated into a lot of scruffy looking foliage on plants this year.

The bad news is that most fungi survive winter in infected plant debris. Fungal mycelium, spores, or resting structures overwinter on dry leaves, twigs, or in the soil. When the weather turns warm in the spring, these fungi become active again.

Fungal spores are pretty much everywhere!! They are very, very tiny, and there will probably always be some of them around. But for a fungus to cause a plant disease infection, there are three things that must be present: the fungal pathogen itself, an acceptable host (plant), and the proper environment. Typically, the environment must have free moisture and appropriate temperatures for the fungus involved.

This past year we had regular, plentiful rainfall, which meant conditions were right for a large amount of plant disease. Hopefully next year, conditions will be less conducive to fungal outbreaks, but we are at the mercy of the weather. Because we had a lot of fungi around this year, there will be plenty of spores waiting to produce infections next year. There is something you can do, however, to help prevent a repeat of this year's high disease levels; **CLEAN UP!**

All infected plant material should be collected and buried, burned or discarded. This includes leaves, branches, and fruit. Material put on the compost pile will not decompose before next year, and can still serve as a source of disease. While you can never remove ALL of the infected material and fungal spores, a thorough clean up will definitely reduce the amount of disease you have next year. Three common tree leaf-spotting diseases that can be lessened with sanitation include oak anthracnose, ash anthracnose and apple scab.

Other diseases that can be lessened with clean-up practices include oak wilt and Dutch elm disease. Dead trees serve as a source of the fungus that can be carried by insects to healthy trees. Red oaks that died this year should be removed before April, and elm trees should be removed as soon as possible to prevent overwintering of beetles beneath the bark. The smaller branches of these dead trees can be chipped up, but larger pieces should be either debarked, burned, or stored as firewood sealed under heavy plastic tarps.

Fall is also a good time to mark dead or dying branches in trees, which can be pruned during the dormant season. Finally, do your best to keep all your plants as strong and vigorous as possible throughout the growing season. Plants that have the right growing conditions and all the moisture and fertilizer they need are more capable to withstand a disease or insect attack. They will be more likely to make it through winter with flying colors if they are not stressed going into dormancy. Be sure they get watered regularly right up until the ground freezes.

Hopefully, the 2001 growing season will be a bit less fungus-friendly than this last year was!