

Spring Clean-up

By Pam Brown, Urban Horticulture Extension Agent

March brings much warmer weather and plants in our landscape start to spring forth with new growth. This is the time of year when we want to refresh the landscape by removing any damage that was caused by cold weather, cleaning up leaves and other plant debris that collected under plants during the winter and applying a new layer of mulch.

This is a good time to also embark on sanitation practices in the landscape that can reduce the incidence of diseases and perhaps also reduce the need to use as much pesticide for insects or disease problems.

Sanitation is a very important tool and is the backbone of plant disease management strategy. When sanitation is used in combination with other management tactics such as cultural practices (proper watering, fertilizing and spacing) and chemical control if it is warranted, the outcome is much more satisfactory. This is because through sanitation, you are eliminating inoculum (fungus, fungal spores and bacteria). Without the inoculum there is no disease. Sanitation includes all activities aimed at eliminating or reducing disease inoculum to prevent the spread of disease to healthy plants. Such as: tilling infected vegetable plants into the soil after harvest; removing infected leaves or flowers of garden and houseplants; pruning infected, distorted or dead branches and removing infected fruit and other diseased plant material.

Sanitation is perhaps the single most important thing you can do to manage many of the leaf-spotting, rust, powdery mildew, bud and flower blight, and canker fungi. This is because many of these fungi over winter on plant debris. If infected plant debris is left in the landscape or garden, spring rains falling on the debris and the fungi on them will promote the production of spores. Wind and rain will help disseminate them to other areas of the garden or landscape.

Burying plant residue with soil helps the debris break down and in the process destroys some pathogens. Pruning out diseased branches can prevent the spread into healthy tissue. Contaminated tools can contribute to the spread of disease. Tools used to prune plants infected with witch's broom, canker, gall and other diseases should be disinfected after each use by dipping the cutting surfaces in a solution of one part bleach to four parts water. Rubbing alcohol (70%) from the drug store will also work and does not require diluting. Pathogens can also be carried from plant to plant on hands. So, wash your hands well, or carry into the garden with you some of the gel hand sanitizer that is now available.

In perennial beds, remove old flower heads, stalks, and any diseased plant parts. Examine roses for dead canes and remove them. Examine the shrubs and trees in your yard for dead branches. If the dead areas are the result of canker-causing fungi, prompt action will reduce the likelihood of the canker invading healthy tissue. Pruning cuts should be made about 4 to 6 inches below the diseased area. If the plant was damaged from frost or freezing temperatures, prune each branch or stem down to the first sprouting buds. Remember to disinfect tools between each pruning cut if disease is suspected. If a tree or shrub was infected with a leaf spot, raking the fallen leaves will help minimize the problem. Camellias and azaleas are susceptible to petal blight causing the flowers to turn brown and rot prematurely. All fallen buds, flowers or petals should be removed from under the plants as soon as possible. On camellias especially, if buds or flowers turn brown on the plant, remove as soon as you notice them. Keep your trash can or bag near by to avoid carrying infected debris across the yard.

The debris collected from sanitation efforts can be buried, burned (if community regulations allow) or composted, provided that the compost pile is properly maintained to achieve an internal temperature of at least 140° F. Temperatures lower than this will not break down the pathogens adequately.

While sanitation should be practiced throughout the growing season, a good early spring cleanup can help minimize disease and insect problems for the rest of the year.

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