

# Branch Rot of Annual Vinca

Dr. Green Thumb

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Branch and stem rot can be a major disease problem for annual vinca (*Cataranthus roseus*). This disease is caused by a soil-borne fungus (*Phytophthora parasitica*) that can persist in the soil for several years. Under conditions of overhead watering, heavy rainfall, or extended periods of wet, hot weather this disease can spread rapidly, which makes it a particular problem in greenhouse production systems. Heavy fertilization also tends to contribute to the disease.

Initial symptoms of disease include greasy, water soaked, grayish-green areas on the shoots and leaves, followed by wilting. As the fungus advances within the plant tissues, reddish-brown lesions develop on plant stems. These lesions result in death of the stem or entire plants. The fungus can move from one plant to another merely by leaf-to-leaf contact. Although the disease is most prevalent above ground, a root rot may also develop. When foliage remains wet, disease progression proceeds very rapidly. Plants may be killed within one to two weeks after symptoms appear.

To prevent the accidental introduction of the disease, always select high quality plants. Do not purchase discolored or unthrifty plant material. Well-drained soil is vital and raised beds are a good option. Avoid soils with high clay content. Plant annual vinca in late May or June. Space plants in such a manner as to encourage dry leaves and minimize leaf-to-leaf contact. Mulching reduces the chances of infection by preventing infested soil from coming in contact with the leaves.

Since wet foliage is a major contributing factor for disease development, every effort should be made to minimize leaf wetness. Planting beds should be watered with a soaker hose or drip tubing. If plants are normally watered by overhead sprinkling, they should be watered in the early morning hours so foliage can dry by mid to late morning.

All vinca plants should be removed at the end of the growing season. To reduce the chances of introducing the fungus into the growing area, do not install vinca in the same landscape area year after year. Since not all annuals and perennials are susceptible to the same fungus that attacks vinca, consider other bedding plants as replacements such as begonia, celosia, geranium, and ageratum.

Plants showing symptoms of wilt or dying should be removed immediately. Fungicides containing chlorothalonil or aluminum tris are effective when applied on a preventative schedule according to the label information.

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