

# Jump Start Spring Disease Control

Dr. Green Thumb

Arkansas Gardener - February

By: Stephen Vann

Our landscape plants, as well as the many tenacious disease organisms that attack them, are poised to kick into high gear within the next few weeks. There are many things we can do as plant custodians during this time period to get ready for the occasion.

Practicing good sanitation around our landscape plants is perhaps one of the single most important things we can do before the growing season gets started. It is best to start these practices just after the threat of the last frost. This is the perfect time to clean up around our plants by removing fallen leaves from the ground beneath and pruning dead portions of the plant that may have resulted from any weather damage or other plant stress. If feasible, collect and bag all of this plant debris and burn if your community allows this practice; otherwise, dispose of properly. A vast majority of our ornamental diseases are caused by a diverse group of microorganisms called fungi. These organisms are very capable of surviving from one season to another in a variety of ways. They are able to withstand the adverse weather conditions of summer and winter that exist in our southern growing regions.

By removing and destroying all of this dead plant debris, sources of disease infections can be reduced or eliminated, especially if you have had a significant disease history on your ornamentals. Sanitation is especially effective for leaf spots and twig blight diseases. When temperatures begin to warm, many fungi initiate active growth, resulting in the subsequent production of microscopic structures called spores. These spores may be splashed by water or carried on wind currents to susceptible plant material. Spores are important in the spread of the disease from one area to another. Frequent rain events or high humidity during the spring months tend to enhance disease activity.

Moisture on plant surfaces can be a major factor in plant disease development. The impact of many plant diseases can be reduced or eliminated by minimizing the time that plant surfaces remain wet from overhead irrigation. If water sprinklers are used, operate them in the early morning hours in order for plant surfaces to dry by mid to late morning. Many leaf and twig diseases of our woody and herbaceous plants result from wet conditions. Black spot of rose, often a devastating disease, can cause problems anytime the foliage remains wet for extended periods. Early morning watering regimes are also highly desirable for controlling many turf diseases.

To reduce plant stress, always install landscape plants in well-drained soils. High clay-content soils tend to hold water, creating an anaerobic condition to plant roots. This condition can predispose the plants to attack by root-rot organisms. By properly installing our landscape plants, we can often minimize plant stress and reduce the need for expensive chemicals that may or may not be effective. Always make sure that your plants are suited for the growing zone in your area.

One of the most common ways of introducing a disease organism into the garden is by planting infected plants and seed. Be sure to closely inspect plants for any signs of disease or general lack of vigor before you plant them. It is important to recognize these potential plant disease sources that can adversely affect the aesthetic value of our landscape plants. **Prevention is always much easier than trying to cure a disease.**

**Correct disease identification is the single, most important, first step in designing an effective control program.** Early, accurate disease diagnosis allows the grower to take corrective measures to reduce economic or aesthetic losses on existing plants or future plantings.

BYLINE: Stephen Vann is an associate professor and Extension urban plant pathologist with the University of Arkansas, Cooperative Extension Service.

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