

Branch and Stem Rot of Creeping Juniper

Dr. Green Thumb
Arkansas Gardener – September
By: Stephen Vann

DIAGNOSIS

This fungal disease can be a common sight on creeping juniper (*Juniperus horizontalis*) growing in the southern states during humid, hot weather conditions with frequent rainfall. Stem and branch rot of these prostrate junipers is caused by the fungus *Rhizoctonia solani*. Considered a soil-inhabiting fungus, it can survive indefinitely on dead plant material and other organic matter. This particular fungus has the potential to cause root and stem diseases on many plants. Frequent, overhead water coupled with poorly drained soils serve to increase the severity and spread of the disease.

Branch and stem rot disease is usually seen on landscape plants that are stressed in some manner. Creeping juniper grows best in well-drained soil conditions and often requires less maintenance than many other ornamentals. Generally speaking, these plants have few diseases and insect pests when compared to other common landscape species.

SYMPTOMS

Branch dieback is the most common and recognizable symptom of this disease. Twigs turn brown at the tips, resulting in dieback. Lower stems may become brown and die near the point of soil contact, giving individual branches a blighted appearance in the landscape. Infected plants may go undetected until several major, lateral stems become blighted by this fungal disease. Weakened landscape plants often become susceptible to many other diseases that do not normally attack vigorously growing plants.

PRESCRIPTION

Since the fungus that causes this disease is ubiquitous in most soils, good cultural practices are the best solution to managing it. For urban landscape plants, managing moisture is a helpful practice. Well-drained soils are imperative for growing junipers. Since frequent rainfall and wet conditions favor disease development, selective pruning of surrounding plants will encourage leaf dryness by improving air movement between and among these shrubs. Dry plant surfaces develop fewer stem-rot and foliar-disease problems. Mulching around plants with non-wood materials may be helpful by preventing or minimizing stem or branch contact with the soil. Chemical control can be effective by using fungicidal sprays containing copper materials such as copper hydroxide. Complete coverage is important. Sprays may be used to protect plant surfaces from infection but may need to be reapplied with the onset of wet weather. Under some environmental conditions, copper-containing materials may result in plant injury.

Read and follow label directions for application. By promoting plant vigor with appropriate fertilization and irrigation practices, stem and branch rot disease can be prevented.

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