

Sooty Mold of Woody Ornamental Plants

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DIAGNOSIS

Sooty mold of woody ornamentals is often misdiagnosed as an infectious plant disease, whereas, in actuality, it is the result of an insect infestation. Sooty mold is commonly observed on the woody shrubs of crape myrtle and gardenia. Elm and pecan trees also tend to occasionally develop this problem during the warm and humid months of May and June. Sooty mold on our ornamentals is actually a collection of several fungal organisms that are found on plant surfaces such as leaves and stems. They do not penetrate plant tissues but merely grow superficially, creating a fungal layer or mat on the plant. These fungal organisms get their primary nutrition from honeydew (insect secretions) deposited on the plant by feeding insects. Aphids, scale, whiteflies, psyllids and leafhoppers are often the notorious culprits of honeydew. If insects are not observed on the affected plants, gardeners should also examine any overhead plants from which the honeydew may drip.

SYMPTOMS

The visual evidence of sooty mold usually becomes quite noticeable to the home gardener during August and September. Many plant enthusiasts panic at the sight of the blackened leaves that have "suddenly" developed on their shrubs or trees. Initially, leaves develop a shiny film on their surfaces. Leaves and stems are also sticky when touched. This sticky, clear film is actually the honeydew that serves as a food source for the growth and development of the sooty mold group of fungi.

The fungal growth appears as irregular black crusts or mats, usually on the upper surfaces of leaves. The fungal growth often resembles a thin, black sheet of tissue paper on the leaf. This is the most common part of the plant affected. This black material can easily be removed by rubbing the leaves with a wet finger or paper towel. The accumulation of the sooty layer can become quite thick with severe insect infestations. The thick layer may actually interfere with light reaching the plant, thus producing a stress condition. Sooty molds are easily diagnosed by the fact that the black fungal growth can be readily removed by wiping the leaf or stem.

PRESCRIPTION

No direct control techniques are prescribed toward the sooty mold fungal growth. Since sooty mold grows on the sugary excretions of insects, control of the particular insect(s) is recommended to treat the sooty molds. The black, fungal layer can be physically removed by washing the plant with an appropriate soapy solution; however, if the insect pests are not controlled, sooty mold often will return.

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