

## **Diagnosing Plant Problems**

*Written by Bill Wrobel, certified WSU Clallam County Master Gardener.*

### **My plant looks sick. How can I figure out what's wrong with it?**

Here are some questions to help you narrow down the possible causes of the problem.

These also are the questions Master Gardeners will ask at their Plant Clinics to help you solve the problem.

- **What plant or type of plant is it? What is it supposed to look like and what are the problems common to that plant type?**
- **What's different? Which part of the plant is damaged?** Compare the damaged area to a healthy area. Some diseases and pests attack only certain parts of the plant.
- **How long has the plant been planted? How was it planted?** Think about the planting method and care given over the first few weeks or months. Improper planting, like leaving the burlap around the root ball, can cause problems years later.
- **Is the problem spreading? Has it gotten worse over time? Do any other plants have the same problem?** This usually hints at living organisms as the cause of the problem, such as insects or fungal diseases. Damage due to living organisms typically increases over time, is limited to only a plant or two and affects only one plant type.
- **How often and how long do you water? Does the water drain? What do the roots look like?** Remember the symptoms of overwatering and under watering are similar, that is wilted yellowing leaves. The roots of overwatered plants, however, will be brown and mushy.
- **Have any chemicals been used near the plant, by you, by your neighbor or the Roads Department? Has there been any soil disturbance near or around the plant such as mowing or weeding?** These questions are looking for cultural causes (i.e., those that result from the environment or inappropriate plant care). This kind of damage usually occurs over a large area, affects many plants and plant types and happens all at once.

- **Can you see any insects, bumps or fluffy material on the stems or leaves? Do the leaves curl? Are there holes in the leaves? Is there a sticky substance on the plant or the ground below the plant?** Here, we are trying to identify the presence of a chewing or a sucking insect.
- **Where in your landscape is the plant and what was in that location before? Have there been any changes in the amount of sun in that area?** As landscapes mature, micro-climates often change and may not be as suitable for a plant after the change.
- **What has the weather been like over the past few months? How does it compare to last year?** This helps to identify if the plant is reacting to a change in its growing conditions.

Finally, one of the most important things you can do to solve a plant problem is to be ever-vigilant. The sooner you detect a problem and figure out what is causing it, the more successful you will be in saving the plant for another day.

### **SIDE BAR**

Help Master Gardeners diagnose your garden problems by bringing the following samples to plant clinic:

- Shrubs, trees, and canes: Bring both affected and healthy plant parts, including the margins where they meet.
- Butterflies, moths and bees: Freeze them and then wrap them in cotton or tissue. Place them in a clean container.
- Other insects and spiders: Bring them in a clean container, uncrushed.
- Turfgrass: Bring in a 4-inch square sample that includes roots and soil. Take the sample from the edge of the affected area so that healthy grass is included.
- Vegetables, bulbs, and annuals: Bring the entire plant, including the roots.

For more information, call 417-2279.