

Plant Clinics

By Jason Miller

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Plant Clinics offer free troubleshooting and more for Skagit County homeowners.

How many times have you wished for a one-stop-shop where you could go to get answers to your gardening questions, hook up with gardening resources, and experience that feeling of euphoria you get when you know exactly how to address a gardening problem, whether it's an insect pest infestation or an unknown pathogen destroying your beloved plants? And as long as you're wishing, why not wish for a resource that was completely free?

That place exists! Among a veritable battery of gardening services, your friendly neighborhood WSU Master Gardeners offer plant clinics where you can go to find answers to your most pressing questions (see sidebar for details). Our 2008 plant clinics open for business during the first week of April, and we're here to help you reach your gardening goals. There are two clinics: one in Anacortes and one in Mount Vernon/Burlington. And, in 2008, the WSU Northwestern Washington Research and Extension Center (NWREC) on State Route 536 will serve as an alternate site for six Saturday plant clinics, as well as a drop-off location for Plant Clinic samples, which can be left during normal hours of operation. (Even though the NWREC primarily serves the interests of small and mid-sized farmers, it hosts educational workshops for home gardeners and volunteer display gardens.)

So, how can the plant clinics help? Let us count the ways:

- Plant disease diagnosis and treatment suggestions
- Insect identification (and control options, if necessary)
- Plant selection ideas
- General gardening advice, such as pruning techniques, weed control and pesticide/herbicide application tips
- Gardening resources guidance: We can put you in touch with soil-test sources, native plant societies, mushroom identification sources and much more



Left to right: Master gardeners Rosalie Myers, Virgene Link and Plant Clinic Chair Janine Smiley examine samples brought to the clinic by Sue Moulton (far right).

Photo by Britt Shellenberger.

The clinics also have two PowerPoint presentations available to groups, from gardening clubs to Rotaries. Both presentations are Skagit County-specific: The first addresses “The Good and Bad Insects in Skagit County”; the second is “Plant Disease 101”—an examination of the common bacteria, fungi and viruses found in our county.

These are traveling presentations, helmed by Plant Clinic Chair Janine Smiley, who will come to your meeting and put on an informative show that can't be beat. All you need to do is call Diana Wisen, Speakers Bureau coordinator, at 428.4270 to arrange a presentation.

Help us help you

Like most collaborative efforts, our troubleshooting abilities depend on the quality of your submission. In other words, we can identify an insect if you bring in the actual insect, rather than simply describing it to us (although sometimes the descriptions are quite entertaining!). And, we can identify a plant disease if you bring in a plant sample on which the disease is displaying a symptom. For more information on collecting and packaging insect and plant-disease samples, cut out and save the sidebar in this article or go to www.skagit.wsu.edu/MG/clinics.htm.

With regard to plant samples and diagnosis, however, even our best-laid plans can sometimes go awry, says Plant Clinic Chair Janine Smiley. “One client brought in a really neat sample of a fir branch that was covered with what looked like adelgid or some type of scale. Even the entomologist said it was insects. We looked at it under the microscope to confirm. It was pitch.”



Master Gardeners Rosalie Myers (left) and Virgene Link (middle) discuss a possible plant disease diagnosis, while Plant Clinic Chair Janine Smiley takes a closer look through the microscope.

Photo by Britt Shellenberger.

Plant Clinics: Free and Easy

Looking for a place to solve your gardening problems for free? Here is all the information you need to know, in a clip-and-save format. Enjoy.

Anacortes Plant Clinic:

Hours: Thursdays from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon, April through September, beginning April 3.

Location: Ace Hardware store, 1720 Q Ave., Anacortes

More info: Call 293.3535

Mount Vernon/Burlington Plant Clinic:

First location: 11768 Westar Lane, Suite A, Burlington

Hours: Wednesdays from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., April through October, beginning April 2

Directions: I-5 to Exit 230 (Hwy 20). West on Hwy 20 to Peterson Rd. Right onto Peterson to Westar Lane. Right onto Westar.

Second location: WSU Northwestern Washington Research and Extension Center, 16650 Hwy 536, Mount Vernon

Hours: 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., May 31, June 28, July 26, Aug. 30, Sept. 27, Oct. 25

More info: Call 428.4270. Dial “0” on clinic days; dial “228” to leave a message.

Bring a good sample!

What is a “good” sample?

Plant disease samples:

- Please submit as much of the plant as possible, including roots. Samples should include both the affected and healthy tissues so a comparison with the “normal” plant is possible. Do not send specimens that are completely dead, dried or rotted.
- Vegetables, bulbs and annuals: Send entire affected plant, including roots.
- Shrubs, Trees: Send both healthy and affected tissues. Include at least one specimen showing margin between healthy and diseased tissues.
- Turfgrass: Send 4" squares, including roots and soil. Take samples at the edge of affected areas and include both healthy and affected grass. For best results, send samples representing healthy, slightly affected, and severely affected areas of lawn.

Insect samples:

- DO NOT MAIL LIVE INSECTS TO US or bring in badly damaged specimens!
- Butterflies, moths and bees should be preserved by freezing, not by submersion in alcohol (alcohol will damage many key features used in identification of these insects).
- All other specimens (including spiders, mites, ticks, etc.) should be preserved in 70 percent ethyl alcohol (rubbing alcohol is fine), preferably in a clear vial or other glass container.

Collecting and packaging plant or weed samples for identification:

- Samples must be alive, fresh and undamaged.
- A single leaf is not enough! Samples should include leaves, buds, stems, flowers, roots, and fruits/seeds, or as many of these features as possible.

If you plan to bring in a plant or insect sample, you can save time by printing out and completing our Clinic Form before your visit (form available at www.skagit.wsu.edu/MG/images/ClinicDiagForm.pdf).

If you are unable to come in during regular clinic hours, you may bring samples to the WSU Skagit County Extension office at 11768 Westar Lane, Suite A, in Burlington (see driving directions, above) any time during normal office hours (8:30 a.m. – 4:30 p.m., Monday to Friday). Master Gardener volunteers will examine the materials on their next clinic day and contact you via telephone or e-mail. If you plan to drop off a sample, please be sure to complete a Clinic Form to accompany it.

It's easy! It's free! Try it!