Q & A July 2007

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Q. What is that ugly bluish growth on the ears of my sweet corn?

A. Common smut - Ustilago maydis - of sweet corn is what you are seeing. Those large bluish growths you see are the galls, which can form on any part of the plant above ground. The galls begin as shiny, greenish to white in color. The ones on the ears expand and fill with masses of powdery spores, but the ones on the leaves and tassels stay small and become hard and dry. The galls on the ears and stems eventually rupture and the spores are spread through the garden by wind, rain, or irrigation water.

Is it edible?

In Central and South America there has long been a tradition of eating corn smut (huitlacoche or cuitlacoche); farmers there receive a premium price for their infected corn. Huitlacoche is just now becoming a gourmet item in the United States, with trendy restaurants in California and New York offering it. Because of the increasing demand, farmers in Florida and Pennsylvania, in cooperation with the USDA, have actually begun cultivating it. Canned Huitlacoche can be found in grocery stores in Mexico.

What is the best way to deal with it?

Development of smut is favored by dry conditions and temperatures between 78 and 93o, and the incidence is higher in nitrogen-rich soils or after heavy applications of manure. Any kind of injury to the plant tissue increases the potential for smut infection.

Plant your corn as early in the season as possible after the soil warms to around 55o in the spring because common smut becomes more prevalent in later harvests. All corn varieties are to susceptible to some degree, so try to plant the ones which are least susceptible. Leaving your garden free of corn for as long as possible will help reduce the number of spores overwintering in the soil. To prevent the spores from getting into the soil, remove and destroy them (definitely not in your compost pile!) them as soon as you notice them.

Q. My butterfly bush and honeysuckle vine are growing too well! How and when can I prune them?

A. The most commonly grown butterfly bush is Buddleia davidii, which blooms on current season's growth. Therefore the best time to prune it back is in early spring before it has begun to grow again. Annual pruning is recommended for this shrub, otherwise it will become woody and leggy and have fewer flowers.

If by chance you have a butterfly bush that flowers on the previous season's growth, like the fountain buddleia (B. alternifolia), you should prune it back by about one-third after it has finished flowering in midsummer.

If your honeysuckle vine produces paired purple-flushed, white flowers on the current season's growth, it is Lonicera japonica, which should be pruned back when the plant is still dormant in winter or early spring. It can be cut back a little or a lot, depending upon how much it needs to be contained.

If your vine produces many long, narrow whorls of scarlet and yellow tubular flowers, then most likely it is L. sempervirens. This honeysuckle should be pruned immediately after it has finished flowering. Cut back as much as you'd like, but make sure to cut right above a nonflowering shoot.

If the vine is hopelessly overgrown and tangled, you need to take more drastic measures, cutting the stems off to about six inches of the ground. Let the foliage die and dry out and it will be much easier to remove. If you do this now to a vine that flowers on the previous year's growth, you will have to wait one year until it flowers again.