

Master Gardener Helpline Frequently Asked Questions and Answers

Q: The leaves on my Oleander bush are turning brown and dying. Branches are starting to die. What is this, and what can I do about it?

A: Oleander Leaf Scorch. Leaves on one or more branches may yellow and begin to droop; and the leaves eventually die. Oleanders affected by this disease decline and then die, usually within 3 to 5 years of the first symptoms. There is no known cure. The best management may be early removal of plants infected with the oleander leaf scorch bacteria.

Q: I have small while insects flying around some of my plants. Also some of the leaves seem to have black stuff on them. What are these insects, and how can I get rid of them?

A: Whitefly. Whiteflies are tiny, sap-sucking insects that are frequently abundant in vegetable and ornamental plantings. They excrete sticky honeydew and cause yellowing or death of leaves. Outbreaks often occur when the natural biological control is disrupted. Management of heavy whitefly infestations is very difficult. Whiteflies are not well controlled with any available insecticides. The best strategy is to prevent problems from developing in your garden to the extent possible. In many situations, natural enemies will provide adequate control of whiteflies; outbreaks may occur if natural enemies that provide biological control of whiteflies are disrupted by insecticide applications, dusty conditions, or interference by ants. Avoid or remove plants that repeatedly host high populations of whiteflies. In gardens, whitefly populations in the early stages of population development can be held down by a vigilant program of removing infested leaves, vacuuming adults, or hosing down (syringing) with water sprays. Aluminum foil or reflective mulches can repel whiteflies from vegetable gardens and sticky traps can be used to monitor or, at high levels, reduce whitefly numbers. If you choose to use insecticides, insecticidal soaps or oils such as neem oil may reduce but not eliminate populations.

Q: The leaves on my rose bushes are turning yellow and falling off. There are small orange/red bumps on the underside of the leaf. What is this, and what can I do about it?

A: Rust. Rusts are fungal diseases that infect many hosts. Dry reddish, yellowish, or orange spore masses or pustules form on infected tissue, especially on the lower surface of leaves. The upper surface of heavily infested leaves turns yellow or brown and infected leaves may drop prematurely. Avoid overhead watering, which favors spore germination. Rake infected leaves and clip and dispose of infected shoots and branches as soon as they appear. Fungicides applied in the spring can reduce some rust diseases, but the frequent applications required to provide good control are generally not warranted in

landscapes.

Q: The leaves on my avocado trees are very small, and pale green in color, and are also drooping. I cannot see any new growth on the tree. Does it need watering or fertilizer?

A: Avocado root rot: Avocado root rot causes leaves to be smaller than normal. They are usually pale or yellow green. New growth is absent or stunted. Feeder roots are blackened and dead. Avocado root rot is associated with excess soil moisture due to over-irrigation or poor drainage. Good water management is essential to reduce the threat of rot. It prolongs the life of diseased trees and can prevent spread to other trees. Avoid prolonged saturation of the soil. Plant on mounds and provide good soil drainage. Some rootstocks may provide resistance.

Q: Can I prune my avocado tree? If so, how much should I cut off, and when should I do this?

A: Young avocado trees should not require extensive pruning. Pruning and thinning are not required to keep avocado trees productive or attractive. If you do prune to keep trees smaller or more confined, the ideal time is just before bloom or just after fruit set.

Q: How can I control spiders in my house?

A: Remember that spiders are primarily beneficial and their activities should be encouraged in the garden. Pesticide control is difficult and rarely necessary. The best approach to controlling spiders in and around the home is to remove hiding spots for secretive spiders such as black widows and regularly clean webs off the house with brushes and vacuums.

Q: The leaves on my peach tree are curling up and look a red color. What is this?

A: Peach leaf curl first appears in spring as reddish areas on developing leaves. These areas become thickened and puckered, causing leaves to curl and severely distort. To prevent peach leaf curl, use resistant peach and nectarine varieties where possible. For nonresistant varieties, treat trees with a fungicide every year after leaves have fallen. In cooler northern locations leaf fall usually is in late November. In warmer southern locations leaf fall can be as late as early January. Generally a single early treatment when the tree is dormant is effective, although in areas of high rainfall or during a particularly wet winter, it might be advisable to apply a second spray late in the dormant season, preferably as flower buds begin to swell but before green leaf tips are first visible.

Q: My apples have grey/brown spots, looking like scabs, on the fruit. What can I do about this?

A: Apple scab, caused by the fungus *Venturia inaequalis*, is generally considered a serious disease of apples in California, causing loss or severe surface blemishing of fruit. Apple scab is most severe in coastal areas where spring and early summer weather is cool and moist. The main objective in scab management is the reduction or prevention of primary infections in spring. Extensive primary infections result in poor fruit set and make scab control during the season more difficult. If primary infections are successfully controlled, secondary infections will not be serious. The key to success in scab control is exact timing and full coverage. Wet periods, temperature, and relative humidity are important factors. Because scab control often is part of a combination treatment aimed at other diseases and insect control, choice of materials and timing are also extremely important.

Q: I have a whole lot of brown tiny pear-shaped insects on the tips of my plants. The leaves seem to be curling up as well. What are these, and how can I control them?

A: Aphids may be green, yellow, brown, red, or black depending on the species and the plants they feed on. All are small, pear-shaped insects with long legs and antennae. High levels of nitrogen fertilizer favor aphid reproduction. Never use more nitrogen than necessary. Use less soluble forms of nitrogen and apply it in small portions throughout the season rather than all at once. Or better yet, use a urea-based, time-release formulation (most organic fertilizers can be classified as time-release products as compared to synthetically manufactured fertilizers). In some situations ants tend aphids and feed on the honeydew aphids excrete. At the same time, they protect the aphids from natural enemies. If you see ants crawling up aphid-infested trees or woody plants, put a band of sticky material (Tanglefoot, etc.). Another way to reduce aphid populations on sturdy plants is to knock them off with a strong spray of water. Most dislodged aphids will not be able to return to the plant, and their honeydew will be washed off as well. Using water sprays early in the day allows plants to dry off rapidly in the sun and be less susceptible to fungal diseases.

Q: How can I get rid of Poison Oak?

A: The primary ways of managing poison oak are treatment with herbicides and mechanical removal by hand pulling, which is not recommended for individuals who are sensitive to this plant. Maintaining a healthy cover of desirable vegetation will reduce potential invasion. This is easiest where you have available irrigation and regularly cultivated soil.

Q: My California Oak tree seems to be dying. It is in the middle of my lawn, so should be getting lots of water, so drought should not be the problem. What could be causing this?

A: Inappropriate watering commonly damages landscape plants. Inadequate water causes foliage to wilt, discolor, and drop. Prolonged moisture and poor drainage results in smaller leaves, die-back or limb drop, and susceptibility to root rot.

Q: How do I prevent gophers, or rabbits, from eating all the plants in my garden?

A: Pocket gophers often invade yards and gardens, feeding on many garden crops, ornamental plants, vines, shrubs, and trees. Most people control gophers in lawns, gardens, or small orchards by trapping and/or by using poison baits.

Rabbits can be very destructive in gardens and landscaped places. A number of methods can be used to reduce rabbit damage but physical exclusion, trapping, and, to a lesser degree, repellents are recommended for protecting garden and home areas.