

Perennials Taking a Beating This Year

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I've been seeing a lot of weird leaf spots and blights on hostas, iris, and other herbaceous (non-woody) perennials this spring. Not surprising, really, with all the rain we've had. It's been long understood that prolonged periods of moisture sitting on a plant's leaves provides the perfect environment for a whole range of fungal and bacterial infections. The heavy winds in recent storms have also caused tiny tears and injuries on the leaves, giving these pathogens more ways of entering the plant.

The cool, wet weather is causing an entire encyclopedia of disease problems on landscape and garden plants. Most of them can be controlled in the same way, so it's not always necessary to fully identify which disease is being seen.

Fungal diseases cause lesions and spots of different colors, shapes, and sizes. In general, though, fungal leaf spots tend to form small, circular to oval spots on the leaves. The spots may turn yellowish to brown or tan, and often developing a distinct red-brown border. As the disease progresses, the spots enlarge and become more numerous. The leaves eventually turn yellow, then shrivel up and die.

Bacterial diseases are not normally as common in the landscape or garden, but with all the recent rain, are certainly likely. Bacterial leaf spots may be larger and more irregular than fungal spots, or they may start off smaller and darker in color. Yellow haloes around each spot are quite common, as the bacteria spreads inside the leaf. The spots usually coalesce and cause the leaf to take on a scorched appearance.

Some common management practices can reduce both of these types of diseases. Sanitation is essential! Be sure to remove all foliage and debris from the garden in the fall, to reduce the amount of inoculum overwintering. If you do see leaf spots developing, wait until the leaves are dry, and then remove them from the plant and destroy them.

Be sure that the soil surface is covered with at least 2 or 3 inches of mulch, so that any organisms in the soil can't splash onto the leaves. If we ever need to irrigate this year, use a soaker hose to keep the foliage dry, or use an above-ground sprinkler early in the morning, so that the leaves dry off as the sun rises. Reduce the amount of nitrogen fertilizer you're using, since rapid, succulent growth is more prone to infection.

Chemical disease controls do not cure infected plants; they simply cover the leaf and form a shield to prevent infection. They should be used at the first sign of disease problems, to protect the rest of the plant. Fungicides, such as chlorothalonil (Daconil) and triforine (Funginex) only work to prevent fungus diseases. If fungicides don't stop the spread and you suspect a bacterial disease, disease control agents containing copper may be useful. Be sure to read and follow all label directions before using any pesticide.

For more information on springtime diseases in the garden, contact the Purdue Extension Service at 812-435-5287 or at my email address below.