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News Release

“Sooty Mold” Production and Control ... **Look up to see where the real problem is coming from**

Question: Several of my shrubs have a black powdery mold growing on the leaves. It is even growing on the patio furniture. What is causing this and what can I do to prevent it in the future?

Answer: The problem you are seeing is a common one this time of year and it is called “Sooty Mold.” The mold develops as a result of a fungus growing on the honeydew exudates produced from the feeding of aphids, scale, whiteflies or another sucking insect. This fungus does not infect the plant but can do damage as a result of reducing photosynthesis. Also, as you have noticed it is very unsightly and generally makes a black sticky mess everywhere it grows.

The sooty mold will usually wash off with the use of a mild insecticidal soap spray and water. However, you need to look up to see where the real problem is coming from. The insects are likely feeding on a tree positioned over the shrubs and patio furniture that is coated with the sooty mold. I noticed some crape myrtles this past week that had a heavy infestation of aphids and sooty mold growing on its leaves and the leaves of everything below it. Hackberry and river birch trees are also notorious for heavy aphid feeding and sooty mold production.

Most plants will tolerate a small insect population and light amounts of sooty mold. Control of sooty molds begins with management of the insect creating the honeydew. For example, populations of aphids are usually highest on succulent, new growth. In some situations they can be dislodged with a strong stream of water if the plant is small enough. Also avoid excessive fertilization to keep plants healthy but not excessively vigorous. Overly vigorous plants are more attractive to insects. The regular improper pruning of crape myrtles often seen in our area can contribute to the problem by causing excessively vigorous growth. Properly pruned crape myrtles will have less vigorous new growth and better air and light penetration, which will reduce the foliage’s attractiveness to sucking type insects.

Another important consideration may be ant management. Ants are attracted to and use honeydew as a source of food. Because of this, they will protect honeydew-producing insects from predators and parasites in order to harvest the honeydew. Using ant baits and spot treating

ants can go a long way towards controlling these honeydew producing insects by giving the beneficial insects a chance to naturally control the bad guys.

Once the honeydew-producing insects are suppressed, sooty molds will gradually weather away. As mentioned before sooty molds can be washed off with a strong stream of water or soap and water to speed up the removal process.

Plants such as hackberry that are perennial problems may be treated in the spring with a systemic insecticide to kill the aphids before they get a chance to do any significant feeding. The systemic insecticide imidacloprid (Bayer Advanced Garden Tree & Shrub Insect Control or Merit) is available to both homeowners and professional applicators. The home-use product (Bayer Advanced Garden Tree & Shrub Insect Control) is diluted with water, and poured onto soil near the base of the tree trunk, as directed on the label. Late winter to early spring (when the new leaves flush) is believed to be the most effective time for a soil treatment in our area. If the area is watered regularly, slightly later applications may do some good but early applications work best. If you wait until you see the problem it is too late.

For more information on this topic or other horticulture related questions, please contact Regional Extension Agent Tony Glover at the St. Clair County Extension office at (205) 338-9416 or email gloveta@aces.edu.