HORTICULTURE COLUMN

GREASY SPOT

There are few major disease problems of citrus in home landscapes. Even with minimal care, the trees grow and produce a bountiful crop after about the fifth year in the ground. Citrus is more prone to have problems from too much TLC (tender loving care) than from lack of care.

One problem that is showing up on some citrus is greasy spot disease. Symptoms first appear as yellowish-brown spots on the leaves. The spots develop a slightly blistered appearance on the underside of the leaves, and ultimately become oily brown or black.

Spots vary in size from small dots to ¼” in diameter. Where several spots grow together, the areas covered may be considerably larger.

Infection of the leaf tissue actually begins in July after summer rains and high humidity have set in. The olive green, greasy looking leaf spots may not appear until winter (November through February), followed by yellowing and leaf drop through the spring. Heavy leaf drop may weaken a tree and make it more susceptible to cold injury in the winter.

Greasy spot is a fungus disease that attacks all varieties of citrus grown in Florida. It is more severe on grapefruit and 'Pineapple’ and 'Hamlin' oranges than on 'Valencia’ oranges, 'Temple’, murcotts or tangerines.

Spores are produced on the dead fallen leaves during periods of frequent rain and high humidity and winds carry them up into the tree where they grow into the underside of leaves produced during the spring.

Control in a home planting is as simple as raking the fallen leaves to remove the source of infection.

Citrus Leafminer is another problem seen this time of year. The damage occurs when new leaves are tender such as during the spring, summer and fall growth flush. Now, as gardeners begin to harvest the crop, evidence of previous insect damage is observed. The culprit is a tiny moth that lays her eggs on the new leaves. A caterpillar hatches out and burrows between the upper and lower layers of the leaf causing zigzag tunnels or mines. The caterpillar moves to the edge of the leaf and turns into a tiny cocoon that hatches into the adult moth.

Since the insect is in the leaf during most of its life, it is difficult to kill with surface applied chemicals. You don’t want to use systemic chemicals that poison the sap and therefore, the fruit you eat. It is difficult to time a pesticide application to kill the insect when they are only susceptible for a short time after eggs hatch.

The good news is the pest is mostly a nuisance and doesn't significantly reduce fruit yield. I call it a "grin and bear it" problem. You know what it is called, but there is no need for control.

As fruit begins to mature, you may notice some fruit drop. This is normal this time of year since more fruit is set than the tree can support.

Note that citrus does not have be full color to be ripe. Now that we have some cool weather, you will notice more color development. The best way to tell if citrus is ripe is to taste it. If you know the variety, we have tables to give you an idea of when it should be at its best flavor.

Frequently, more harm than good comes from an attempt to control disease and insect problems with pesticides. To be successful, the right material should be applied at the right time using the right amount in the right manner. If any of these conditions cannot be met, it is usually better not to spray at all.
Citrus in the landscape will rarely require an application of a pesticide. When a treatment is justified be sure to read and follow the label instructions and precautions. Treat all pesticides as poisons. Choose them wisely and use them, store them and dispose of them in a safe manner.

Before you spray anything, know your enemy. Bring plant samples to the Plant Clinic, Monday to Friday from 10am to 2 p.m. Master Gardeners will help diagnose problems and recommend the least toxic management method. The Osceola County Extension Office, an off campus branch of the University of Florida, is located at 1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane, next to the rodeo grounds. You may E-mail digital photos for diagnosis to epabon5@ufl.edu.

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