

Leaf Issues Abound

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

If there has been one common question in recent weeks it has been, “what’s wrong with this leaf?” Almost to a leaf, the answer comes down to one simple thing - nearly 20 inches of rain in May and June. That much rain at that time of the year is going to cause a lot of problems for leaves. Some of the problems show up right away. Other problems start showing up throughout the rest of the summer. Let’s highlight some of the more common problems we’ve seen and some that are yet to arrive, but are likely coming.

Sycamores are often the first foliar disease issue we see in many springs. Anthracnose is a common disease (in no way related to anthrax) that will cause early season defoliation of sycamores. It also often kills branch tips which explains why some sycamores have such crooked branches. Sycamores have long since regenerated leaves and are doing well.

Apple trees have two diseases that we see every year. Cedar apple rust hits earlier, with symptoms often showing up by late May. Rust has a limited infection period that is usually done by late May. Apple scab can have several rounds of infection throughout the summer. Flowering crab trees that become very sparse with foliage by the late summer are suffering from scab. Both diseases will cause spots on the leaves and will cause the leaves to turn yellow and fall off. Raking up and destroying these leaves (burning or placing in the trash for removal) will help reduce the disease pressure. Some cultivars and varieties are resistant to one or both diseases. If your tree often loses leaves then it may be worthwhile to treat with fungicides starting in late April.

Many of our ornamental pears were hit hard with pear rust this spring. The disease is very similar to cedar apple rust and the infection period was April and May as well. Some of the leaves on these pears have since fallen off and new leaves have regrown. It’s important to note that in most cases of leaf diseases of trees, once you see evidence of the disease it is far too late to take action. Fungicides work by preventing diseases, they don’t cure diseases. Think of it like a vaccination. You have to protect leaves from the infection.

More recently we have been seeing lilacs that look like they were hit by a blow torch. While lilacs can be impacted by ash-lilac borer, that damage is usually restricted to just a stem or two that dies quickly and breaks out of the plant easily. What we are seeing right now is more of an entire side of a shrub looking like it’s been hit by fire. This is most likely powdery mildew. We often see powdery mildew in the late summer or fall. It causes leaves to look like they have a white powder on them. Infection late in the summer is usually ignored. Unfortunately, our weather in May created a spring infection which is now killing the leaves. Treating now won’t likely help. It would help to water these shrubs with a slow open trickle from a garden hose. This will encourage the lilacs to put on new growth yet this year.

Lastly we have mycosphaerella leaf spot of ash. This is a late season infection of certain green ash cultivars. It causes leaf spotting and late season defoliation. I’ve seen a few trees starting to show this disease and it will likely become more apparent in the weeks ahead.

Again, for virtually all of these, it’s too late to do anything as the infection period is far earlier in the season. If we have dry weather, watering will encourage new growth to replace diseased foliage. If you are interested in applying preventative fungicides next spring or just want more information on any of these, please contact me at the Extension Office.