

INSPECT, DETECT & PROTECT

By John Johnston

Encourage customers to look for problems in their gardens early, and use these tips to help them solve any potential issues.

Summer weather takes its toll on people and plants alike. If plants aren't healthy enough to get through the summer months, they rarely rebound health-wise to survive a frigid winter. This applies to both the landscape and the lawn.

Inspect and Detect

No matter how hot it is outside, consumers need to, at some point, venture outdoors and inspect both their plants and their property.

This kind of thorough visual inspection can save a homeowner hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars down the road.

Encourage your customers to get into the habit of walking their home property on the first day of each month during the growing season to inspect plants (and lawn) for insect or disease damage.

Early detection is key to correcting problems.

It's the long lapses of time that can enable an otherwise small issue to become established and costly to correct.

An Ounce of Prevention

Many plant problems are readily identified during the summer months. July and August are an especially prime time to spot trouble and minimize damages, but by then it might be harder to control or contain insects or diseases.

In the first 30 days after planting, all of the focus is on moisture uptake and development. It's equally important for consumers to begin their observations of plant health and take protective measures as needed.

When inspecting plants, consumers should focus on scouting for leaves (or flowers) that are missing, distorted or chewed.

Common visible culprits are bagworm, tent caterpillars, Japanese beetles, cutworms, aphids and the spooky-yet-colorful tomato hornworm. These insects are usually located on the topside of plant surfaces and even novice gardeners see them at work.

For prevention-minded customers, keep your shelves stocked with neem oil and other botanical extracts.

If your customer is unsure of the type, have them collect a sample and bring it to the garden center for identification. You may then recommend the appropriate response, including spray solutions.

When no visible insects are present, identifying the culprit can be a greater challenge. Spider mites, slugs, scale and miners aren't easily seen without further diagnostics from a sample.

Diseases are also often easily identified on plants. Two common summertime diseases are powdery mildew and blackspot. Dense foliage on mature plants, paired with high heat and humidity, is a recipe for poor air circulation around the plants.

In these conditions, it doesn't take long for disease to crop up and become established. These two specific types of disease are common on some

varieties of roses. The white powder of mildew starts with tender new topside foliage and works its way down through the plant.

Blackspot starts from the bottom leaves and works its way up the plant. Removing these infected leaves from the plant AND from the soil bed can control it easiest.

Blackspot once established spreads quickly by infected spores from splattered water and wind. A soil bed without mulch can also ramp up its spread from plant to plant. Early detection is key to keeping any rose garden free from disease.

For prevention-minded customers, keep your shelves stocked with neem oil and other botanical extracts. Educate your staff and use signage to teach and promote the benefits of these products.

Long-term protection from diseases was uncommon among consumers until the 1990s. Spraying weekly was the norm for many gardeners to protect and control insect and disease problems.

A Pound of Cure

Once a pest or disease has taken hold, it's time for curative measures. Depending on the circumstances, plants can often recover if a problem is detected and treated early.

Having mixed up a few hundred tank spray mixtures in my time, I still remember the golden rule of applying chemicals: Follow the label directions. It's a good bet that many consumers gloss over the label and don't heed the instructions to protect eyes, wear long-sleeved clothing and wash hands after mixing and spraying chemicals.



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MANAGEMENT

Did you know that most fungicides are classified as warning or danger-labeled product? The reason, in most cases, is that these products are severe eye irritants. When the label says stay downwind or wear eye protection when spraying, there's a reason for it.

Today's newest convenience products are sold in a concentrate, mixed in a watering can and poured around the base of plants. The technique is called a "drench" method. It's available in select insecticides and fungicides.

Some formulations also provide some nutritional content for root uptake. This "systemic" type of control is today's favorite of time-starved gardeners who want the easiest path to success without spraying.

Alternative Chemistry

Systemic controls have their place in gardening depending upon who you speak with. Protecting our pollinators is a massive undertaking that needs everyone's attention.

As the removal of dangerous chemistry continues state by state, more emphasis should be placed upon alternative chemistry and better gardening practices.

Consumers are eager to protect their families, their pets and their homes. Research tells us to be aware of the consequences and educate responsibly. Organic, natural, biological, botanical and even the word, OMRI-listed, are terms that are relevant to the consumer today, and weren't so decades ago.

When manufacturers offer product knowledge seminars, your store should participate to know what's new and improved for the consumer.

Share Best Practices

The best times to apply chemical products are usually early in the morning or late in the day after the sun goes into the horizon. The effects of sunlight and heat just don't help leaf surfaces under duress,

but can fry them quickly, especially if the plant is already struggling for survival.

A good watering or two a couple of days prior to spraying is recommended to give the plant its first drink offering of water, not chemicals.

One of the oldest and safest insecticides still in use is lightweight horticultural spray oil. Some heavier oil-based products aren't recommended for use during hot summer months. These don't absorb into the leaf surface readily, but stand long enough to work like a magnifying glass using the sun's rays to burn the leaf's surface.

Today's expanding use of natural plant oils are becoming more common in the garden, lighter in thickness (viscosity), and safe for use when applied as directed on the label.

Encourage your customers to take regular walks through their yards to inspect and detect problems early on.

Teach them the benefits of cost-effective preventive measures and best practices.

Be ready to offer support and advice when curative action is needed.

The result is an educated consumer, protection of their landscape investment and enduring customer loyalty for you and your business. **LGR**



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