

TURNING PESTS into profits

Increasingly, customers turn to the winning combination of Chalet Nursery's knowledgeable staff and its Plant Health Care Center to help diagnose and treat their plant ailments.

By Jennifer Brennan

There is nothing like the reaction of an amazed customer who is looking at a monitor showing crawling spider mites on the leaf they just carried into your store. We're all familiar with customers who bring in baggies of diseased and/or insect-infested leaves, asking, "What's wrong with my plants?"

At Chalet, we make every effort to staff our retail store with people who are prepared not only to answer that question, but also to help solve the customers' problems. Using a dissecting microscope with a camera connected to a video screen is the ultimate tool to accomplish that goal.

I realized the need for plant diagnosis while on staff at the Chicago Botanic Garden's Plant Information office. This was a void waiting to be filled. Customers were like sponges, soaking up any information they could get. For 10 years, I was one of the horticulturists involved with the Master Gardener volunteers. The quest for answers at the Plant Information office would fluctuate from 300 questions a month in January to 3,000 questions a month during the peak season of May through July. Using a video-microscope we would diagnose diseases, identify insects and determine cultural problems. We would give cultural, chemical and biological solutions based on University of Illinois and Illinois Department of Agriculture recommendations. The customer then had to decide which method of control was best, and if a chemical was recommended, where to find it.

The Plant Health Care Center

Joining Chalet full time in 1998, I experienced the other end of the customer search — the dilemma of tracking down the chemical, also called the active ingredient, that was recommended to get rid of the insects or control the disease. Formerly known as the Garden Pharmacy, this is where Chalet's Plant Health Center is invaluable.

Fourteen years ago, Chalet management decided to isolate the pesticides in one area of the store, away from heavy traffic, yet still clearly visible. A green awning marks the entrance. The room is ventilated to draw out all the odors, so as not to offend anyone.

There are sections for insecticides, fungicides and herbicides; as well as a separate section for the alternative Earth-friendly/natural versions.

Along with staff diagnosticians at Chalet Nursery, the Plant Health Care Center is one of the retailer's most useful services. Using a video-microscope, customers can really see what's wrong with their plant(s).





The best examples of diseases and insects of the season are displayed in the Plant Health Care Center for customers to compare with their own plants

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Using a marketing system designed by Bonide, the shelves are color-coded for each type of chemical so that customers can find the products on their own when the staff is busy. However, during the peak season we try to have a staff person present at all times in the room to “translate.” This room is where the microscope with the camera that displays images on a monitor is located.

This combination of staff diagnosticians and the Plant Health Care Center is one of our most useful services. Not only do customers get a solution to their problem, but they can also purchase the product to solve it. We don't send them on a search for the Holy Grail. We have the products right here.

Off-Season Seminars For Staff

The key to the success of these services is keeping staff members current on the latest research and the newest products, so we hold product knowledge seminars during the off-season — something we call Chalet College. It is an eight-week

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program with lectures about diagnosis of diseases, identification of insects and detailed product and service information from our suppliers, such as Bonide, The Care of Trees and Neudorff.

Our reference library includes Johnson and Lyon's *Insects that Feed on Trees and Shrubs* and Sinclair and Lyon's *Diseases of Trees and Shrubs*, Donald Orton's *Coincide*, John Lloyd's *Plant Health Care for Woody Ornamentals*, and University of Illinois' *Illinois Homeowners Guide to Pest Management*, APS Press' *Diseases of Herbaceous Perennials*, and the APS Press compendiums for rose, turf, conifer, rhododendron and azalea, and foliage plant diseases and insects. Regionally speaking, the staff is also encouraged to attend seminars at the Mid-American Trade Show, the Perennial Plant Association Annual Symposium, the Morton Arboretum and the Chicago Botanic Garden.

Additional Resources

Two more incredible resources help us stay ahead of the questions. First is the "Home, Yard & Garden Pest Newsletter," written by extension specialists from the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana and the Illinois Natural History Survey.

These plant pathologists, entomologists and horticulturists write about problems that are being seen throughout the state. As we are located in northern Illinois, we usually see the same problems 10 days to two weeks later than the more southern regions.

Second is the indispensable Plant Health Care Report, the scouting report of the Morton Arboretum. This report comes out weekly with the degree-day information, diseases, insects and weeds that have been seen at the Morton Arboretum. Also included is a feature article of the week with current research findings or information about new varieties of ornamental plants.

Pest Of The Year: Magnolia Scale

One of my responsibilities as



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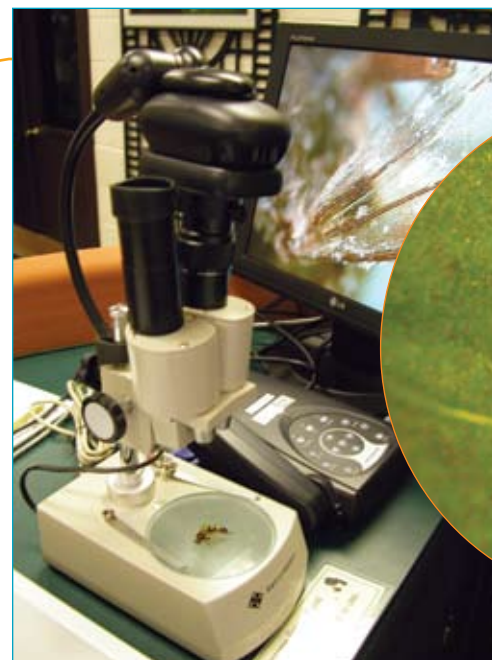
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Equipment: Chalet's Microscope & Camera

Microscope: Ken-A-Vision T-2400 Stereo Microscope with 20x eyepiece

Camera: AverMedia AverVision 130 Document Camera; AverVision 130 Microscope Adapter

Monitor: LG Flatron monitor (Best Buy)

manager of the Education Center is to distribute this information to the Chalet staff members. We hold weekly meetings to talk about recent articles and discuss samples that we see from customers. We usually see the same pest or disease from different customers. The pest that we saw most often the past year was the magnolia scale. During July, we saw 10 to 15 samples per week. In epidemic situations like this, we write a one-page fact sheet that describes the pest or disease, the damage it can cause and the control. The customer can take a copy as a reference after we diagnose the problem.

As a result of these efforts, our reputation as good "plant doctors" has been growing. This is evidenced by the number of people who bring samples into the store, drawn by word of mouth advertising. I realize just how many samples come in when I am preparing for the annual "Diseases and Insects of the Season" lecture. I have fun collecting the best to display, starting about three weeks before the lecture. I fill the entire Education Center with interesting (some think disgusting) specimens. The best are displayed in the Plant Health Care Center for people to compare with their own plants.

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