

# Home & Garden Education Center



**UConn** | COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE,  
HEALTH AND NATURAL RESOURCES  
PLANT SCIENCE AND LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE  
EXTENSION

## What is Wrong with My Plant?

Susan Pelton, UConn Home and Garden Education Center

We get many calls, emails, and walk-ins at the UConn Home and Garden Education Center and one of the most common inquiries is ‘What is wrong with my plant?’ It often appears to the homeowner that there is no apparent reason for the sudden failing of a plant and that the symptoms have just appeared out of the blue but this is not usually the case. Plants may be in a state of decline for some time before it is noticed that a third of the shrub is brown. Should you find that your rhododendron has one whole side where the leaves are curled and brown and feel that you would like an explanation then we welcome your call. But first, there are some questions that you can answer that will help us to help you.

What is the name of the plant? Identification of the species is always the first step and we are happy to do that with an image or sample if the homeowner doesn’t know it. Why is that important? Well, if we are looking at an ailing boxwood or a sick-looking patch of pachysandra then we will be on alert for possible boxwood or pachysandra blight. When a disease is currently a frontrunner in our pathology lab it will be the first thing to come to mind. Of course, an actual diagnosis is necessary before treatment can be suggested.



Boxwood blight, UConn H & G image

Plant location, site history, and sun exposure are also used to determine the reasons for decline in a plant. Is it in a container that might dry out frequently? Inside a home where the humidity may be too low? In a landscape or flower bed where it may get too much or not enough sunlight? Is it a lawn issue? All too often plants are placed in areas where they may look great to begin with but are just totally wrong for them. Poor drainage can mean that a plant sits in water for an extended period, a problem that cropped up many times this spring as we had so much rain that it caused root rot problems for shallow-rooted plants like rhododendron and azalea. While we can’t control the weather, improper irrigation can be rectified. We discourage overhead sprinklers that can lead to fungal diseases when foliage doesn’t dry out, especially in plantings with poor air circulation.

What's going on beneath the ground may affect plants in many ways. Having a soil test from the UConn Soil and Nutrient Analysis Lab can determine the pH and nutrient levels of your soil, information that is important when we are looking at plant health. Recent applications of fertilizers, fungicides, herbicides, and insecticides or even the lack of these is useful to know. Lawns can exhibit swaths of yellowing and browning when fertilizer has been improperly applied and many herbaceous perennials can suffer from the effects of phytotoxicity, also known as pesticide burn, when products are used under high temperatures or adverse weather conditions. Many a vegetable plant has visited our office showing the effects of herbicide drift when a broadleaf weed control has been applied to a nearby lawn on a windy or humid day. Always follow the label directions when using any pesticide.

Now let's talk about what you are seeing. Is it an isolated plant or is an entire planting suffering? Wide swaths of browning along a drive or walkway could be an abiotic problem as these areas may be exposed to high levels of salt from ice melting products. Diseases can present themselves in a variety of ways so we ask if there is browning, leaf spots, rot, tip dieback, yellowing, or wilting. Is the entire plant affected or is it just the flowers, fruit, or leaves? And of course, is there any sign of insect activity? Holes in leaves and frass (insect poop) are good indicators of the presence of a sucking and piercing insect such as an aphid. Aphids will also produce a sticky secretion called honeydew that ants love to harvest. Honeydew doesn't hurt a plant but it can lead to sooty mold, a dark fungus that can coat leaves and prevent photosynthesis thereby weakening a plant. When looking for insects, don't forget to turn leaves over and look underneath them. Look on stems and trunks too. Holes in tree trunks could be from insect borers or from the feeding of birds like a yellow-bellied sapsucker or woodpecker. Your plants have so much information that you can share with us to help find out what is going on with your plant.

Rose leaves with sooty mold, UConn H & G image



For more suggestions on plant and insect problems or on other home and gardening topics, call the UConn Home & Garden Education Center, toll-free, at (877) 486-6271, check out our website at [www.ladybug.uconn.edu](http://www.ladybug.uconn.edu) or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.