

## DIAGNOSING PLANT PROBLEMS

Nature is nature, and as steadfast and attentive as we are to our plants, sometimes our plants “get sick”. We may feel discouraged or even panicked that one of our treasures has something wrong with it. It can be equally as frustrating to figure out what exactly is the problem. After all you can’t dig up your favorite tree and bring it in to the “plant doctors”.

As more gardeners reference plant information on the Internet, beware that much of what is on the Internet is likely not geared toward your unique climate. You might be led astray. If you are in Minnesota, you don’t want someone in Florida telling you how to take care of your roses.

Always take *samples* of your sick plants to your favorite *independent garden center* – not box stores. Bring in the largest sample that represents the problem you are seeing at home. Bring in a sample of a healthy part of the plant too. Bring in a sample as soon as you notice that something doesn’t look quite right with your plant. It can be difficult (somewhat humorously) to attempt diagnose a plant months after it has died.

### **Youngest vs. oldest leaves**

I repeat over and over to “*know your plant*”. As it relates to sick plants, to know your plant is to be able to differentiate between the youngest vs. oldest parts of the plant. The ability to distinguish the youngest from the oldest leaves gives you a powerful tool to assess the health of your plant.

It is common for plants to shed some of their *oldest* leaves, which should not cause alarm if you “know your plant”. Many plants shed their oldest leaves during “extreme” times of the year like the driest, hottest parts of summer or the coldest parts of winter.

On the other hand, if the *youngest* leaves on a plant look damaged, discolored or deformed in any way, something is definitely wrong. Damaged new growth is a sign that you need to take some kind of action.

### **Collecting a sample**

While collecting samples, note where the damage is on the plant. Where did you take the sample leaves? Were they the oldest leaves toward the bottom or inner parts of the plant? Were they the youngest leaves on the tips of branches? Does the whole plant look this way? Again, the ability to

distinguish the youngest/oldest leaves gives you a powerful tool to assess the health of your plant.

### **Once you find the solution**

Sometimes we need to use controls like Neem Oil or a dormant spray, for instance, to remedy our problem. To ensure your gardening success, *always read the entire instruction label before applying any control.*

That one sentence on the instruction label, if you miss reading it, may result in harm to your plant. You'll commonly find an instruction like "do not apply during midday in direct sun." To do so may burn the leaves of your plant. Or you may read, "do not apply when temperatures are under 65 F." If it's too cool for the control, you're wasting your money applying it.

Once you've read the entire instruction label (here comes the tricky part), *do exactly what the instructions say* regarding how much to apply, where to apply it, how often to re-apply it, etc.