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Fall Chores

As cooler weather approaches, important tasks await the avid gardener. Great looking vegetable gardens, orchards, and home landscapes don't just happen. Plenty of elbow grease and hard work are required to be successful. Plants must be fertilized, watered, pruned, weeded--the list goes on and on.

Attention to detail is extremely important when taking a proactive approach against disease. Gardeners who maintain healthy plants often use a combination of common-sense strategies to keep leaf spots, wilts, root rots, and similar diseases under control. The following strategies can be carried out this fall and will likely maintain or improve the health of your garden.

Leaf spot diseases such as rose black spot, photinia leaf blight and holly tar spot can be reduced next year by removing fallen leaves before next spring. In the case of vegetable garden plants, remove this past season's crop debris from the garden. Most microorganisms which cause disease survive our winter conditions with little difficulty, so sanitation will help reduce such diseases as early blight and Septoria leaf spot of tomatoes in next season's garden.

While you're out in the garden, it would be a good idea to make a few notes about "what vegetables were grown where." This will allow you to devise a rotation strategy for next spring and avoid the mistake of planting the same vegetables in the same spot. Diseases have a way of building up if the same vegetable crop is planted too long in the same spot.

In the orchard, most canker and dieback diseases such as fire blight and black knot of plums will be less of a problem if infected branches are removed by pruning. Be sure to cut 6 inches or so below the last visible signs of infection. Clean and disinfect cutting tools between cuts to prevent spread of plant disease microorganisms. Ten-percent bleach solution (1 part bleach to 9 parts water) is a very good disinfectant to dip your pruning shears in after each cut to help decrease the spread of infection among fruit trees. Remember to wash and oil your pruning shears after use; otherwise, the disinfectant can rust them.

Remove "mummies" (old, dried-up fruit) which may be present on and beneath peach trees as a way to cut down on brown rot fruit disease. This is also helpful for bitter and black rots of apples. Diseased apples, which may still be on trees or fallen to the ground, should be removed to help cut down on these fungus diseases next year.

Fall is a great time for collecting soil samples to determine fertility needs for gardens, orchards, and landscape plantings. It pays to follow a recommended fertility program, since well-fed plants are less vulnerable to attack from diseases and other pests. At the same time you're gathering soil samples to identify fertility needs, collect duplicate samples to have your soil checked for nematodes. These pesky little creatures can rapidly build up and cause problems. Root knot and other nematodes can certainly cause problems at times.

Take advantage of these cooler temperatures to clean up your garden site. A proactive approach to disease is much more effective than reacting after a disease problem is underway in your landscape.

Mississippi State University Extension Service

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Dr. Eddie M. L. Smith, County Coordinator & Extension Agent
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By Lynne Barze' SEE PAGE 14

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