

Desert plant disease

Among the many benefits of living in the beautiful, if challenging, Mojave Desert, is that our low humidity does not support the development of many plant diseases. The life-forms that cause disease can be bacteria, fungi, parasitic plants, even viruses. Most of these disease organisms, fortunately, need a higher level of air moisture than they can obtain in the desert. Unfortunately, that does not mean there are no diseases, and certainly does not mean there are no plant problems.

The desert can be defined as an area with intense sunlight, high temperatures, and very low humidity. These can put plants under great strain, especially ones already poorly adapted to these conditions. Almost any disease will be worse if a plant is already experiencing stress.

Some diseases that appear in the desert will rarely take hold until the plant has been injured. Fruit trees, especially things like apples, peaches or pears, having thin bark, are liable to become sun scalded. This is remarkably similar to sunburn on human skin. In plants, however, not only would the plant be damaged, but the damaged site can become an open avenue for diseases to enter and ultimately become established.

For these thin-barked fruit trees, preventing damage is an important first step in maintaining health. Something as simple as an application of a very dilute coat of white latex plant can prevent sunscald on tender trunks. Note, this should be very dilute, the consistency of milk or whitewash. It acts as a sunscreen and a light reflector. You are not painting lumber; this is simply to reflect the light as much as possible.

Some bark-eating insects can be repelled and the fungal disease Sooty Canker can be prevented by this simple act.



Canker

Other diseases appear as if by magic, and need different approaches in addition to maintaining plant health. Fire blight, for instance, attacks the young leaf and stem tissue of trees and shrubs within the rose family. The rose family, however, contains three subfamilies, and includes well over 2800 species. Fire blight can attack over 200 of them.

This disease can devastate pears, apples, plums, even pyracantha. The bacterial villain enters through the young twigs and burns this tender tissue – it looks much like someone took a torch and ran it across small stems and leaves. It can spread several ways, via insects or birds, usually, but people who prune a diseased plant and fail to sanitize their tools can be equally at fault.

If you are unlucky enough to see fire blight in your landscape during the spring, cut the affected limb at least one foot beyond any visible discoloration. Later in the season, after harvesting fruit, prune back several inches beyond any new discoloration. Keeping the bark dry can reduce the risk of many plant diseases. If possible, make sure



Fire Blight

sprinklers are aimed away from tree trunks. Another way to promote plant health is to use slow release fertilizers, which keep young tissue from becoming overly succulent.

The Cooperative Extension website has several publications on dealing with these problems available at no-cost.

Dr. Angela O'Callaghan is the Social Horticulture Specialist for Clark County Cooperative Extension. Contact ocallaghana@unce.unr.edu or 702-257-5581.