

## Why leaves turn yellow

Fresh new leaves appear throughout the landscape in spring. Sadly, some of those new leaves will become yellow. This is distressing, but not knowing why is even more so.

When naturally green leaves become yellow, they look sickly, and we often reach for fertilizer or pesticide before diagnosing the problem.

Know how a plant **should** appear before calling it sick. Then, ask a few questions. Are the leaves yellow overall?

Pale or yellow leaves can indicate several things. Are those leaves at the base of the plant, i.e. older leaves? If they are, and if they fall off, the plant might not be receiving enough water.

If it is sufficiently watered, it may be missing nitrogen. Add compost or fertilizer to the soil around the plant. Even with that, leaves will not miraculously heal. You will definitely lose at least some of them.

If the entire leaf is yellow or pale, but is staying attached to the stem, it may not be a nutrient problem, but a **drainage** problem. Roots sitting in a muddy hole cannot use water. When roots stop pulling up water, the whole plant suffers, even looking as if it has both water and nutrient shortages! Here, you must improve drainage.

That could mean drilling through the soil with an **augur**, or moving the suffering plant to a different location – one where you've already checked the drainage! If the plant is dead, do not move it.

There is another kind of yellowing. Here younger, newer leaves at the top of the plant become pale, but they still have normal green veins.



*Free mulch at the  
Research Center and Demonstration Orchard*

The most common reason for this is - the soil is so alkaline that plants cannot use the nutrients present. Iron and zinc become deficient. One solution for this is adding sulfur to lower the soil pH. **That** is a slow process; the amount to add varies with the soil type and alkalinity. This obviously requires preparation.

Some people just put on iron and other micronutrients. This greens the foliage quickly, and generally does not hurt the plant, but it cannot cure an underlying soil problem.

Adding compost to the soil can help with this partial yellowing. It has nutrients, helps balance soil pH and helps with drainage. You might want the benefits of compost without disturbing the roots of an established plant. Watering with a dilute compost suspension might not work dramatically, but it is effective.

Preventing problems is better than hunting for a cure. Check the drainage where you want a new plant. Water should not stand in the hole for many hours.

At times odd things just happen – for instance, leaves on only one side of a plant suddenly turn yellow. This is often due to a chemical – herbicide or pollution. Has anyone been spraying “weed killer”? Even “weed and feed” products must be used carefully. Is the plant close to an active road? Pollution can cause plants to get yellow or discolored.

Examine the plant and its environment. There is rarely one simple explanation for yellowing leaves.

Dr. Angela O'Callaghan is the Social Horticulture Specialist for University of Nevada Cooperative Extension. Contact [ocallaghana@unce.unr.edu](mailto:ocallaghana@unce.unr.edu) or 702-257-5581.