

The Green Thumb

Lawn and Garden News You Can Use

July 2009

That Sticky Stuff on Trees and Shrubs

David Robson, horticulture educator

Have you noticed a sticky substance on the leaves of trees and shrubs? Or, have you recently parked your car under the boughs of a spreading maple only to discover it splattered with a sticky material? Don't blame the tree!

The substance is not tree sap, but a sign of an infestation of insects called *aphids*. Aphids, often called plant lice, seem to be infesting plants this summer. They can be found on maples, peppers, cabbage, pine trees, bluegrass, apples, and many other plants.

An aphid is usually specific to one plant or possibly a very few species. For example, the tomato aphid is found on tomatoes; the pine bark aphid is found on pine limbs and trunks; and the cabbage aphid infests cabbage, cauliflower, and broccoli. But, some aphids, such as the green peach aphid, are general feeders found on peach trees, peppers, and potatoes.

Aphids are slow moving, winged or wingless, soft-bodied insects that vary in size and color. They multiply rapidly, often producing young that mature in a week or less to produce even more aphids.

They also are susceptible to disease and attack by parasites and predator insects. An aphid population on a particular plant can increase rapidly or disappear just as fast.

Evidence of an aphid infestation includes curled leaves caused by aphid feeding, the presence of a sticky substance called "honeydew" with a sooty black mold growing on it, and ash-colored skins shed by the aphids as they grow. Live aphids may have disappeared due to disease, lack of food, or other factors.

A heavy stream of water will knock aphids off the plants. An insecticidal soap is an organic alternative. Heavy aphid infestations can generally be controlled by insecticide sprays including a few systemics. However, a few aphid species are resistant to some of these insecticides.

An infestation of aphids on healthy, established shade trees generally does not need to be treated. The insignificant damage to the tree does not justify the cost of hiring a commercial sprayer who has the equipment to treat large trees. Heavy infestations on small or weak, ailing trees can be controlled with an insecticide.

Time and money is often better spent fertilizing and watering to insure good recovery and health. But, avoid fertilizing trees and shrubs after July 15. Late summer fertilization can often stimulate lush growth that does not have sufficient time to harden off before winter sets in. Fertilizer is most effective when it is applied in the fall or early spring.

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Summer Mulching has Big Benefits For New Landscape Plants

Tony Bratsch, horticulture educator



Mulching has lots of benefits, particularly for new plants in the landscape. Growth of newly set trees, shrubs, and perennials can be greatly improved by adding a surface mulch of shredded bark, leaves, peat, or well-seasoned wood chips.

Mulching can be done just about any time, but best benefits are seen when it's applied before the heat of summer arrives.

The main advantage to mulching is improved root growth under the mulched area due to increased moisture and cooling.

Research has shown that mulching trees at the time of planting resulted in a 400 percent increase in fine root development in the top 6 inches of soil. For water uptake, this is important for new plants with limited root systems. Very warm soil temperatures, above 85 to 90 degrees F, inhibits rooting in most plants. But in mulched areas, soils can be 10 to 15 degrees lower, and continued root and plant growth occurs.

Reducing competition from lawn grasses is another advantage of mulching. The majority of landscape species originated in woodland environments, with plenty of fallen leaf cover over soils.

In general, the roots of trees, shrubs, and other plants do not compete well with fast-growing lawn grasses.

Part of improved growth with mulching is due to less grass competition. For young trees or shrubs in the lawn, the area from the trunk to the edge of the root ball should be mulched, or at least kept free of grass, to reduce competition.

Although mulching offers big benefits, it can be overdone. You've probably seen the common mulch "volcano" piled around trees in a landscape.

The mulch layer should not exceed a 4-inch depth. When placing mulch, avoid putting mulch against the tree trunk. Covering the trunk with mulch may cause decay of the living bark at the base of the tree. Also, rodents can damage tree and shrub trunks under a heavy cover of mulch, especially in the winter.

Keep a mulch-free area, 1 to 2 inches wide, at the base of the tree to prevent decay and deter rodent activity.

Mulch is discouraged for windbreak plantings in low-maintenance sites because of the greater potential for rodents. Remove fescue-grass under windbreak trees with a herbicide or use a mechanical method of removal.

Mulching also has indirect advantages. For example, a circle of mulch provides a protective barrier from the lawn mower and weed-eater. Young trees (and most older trees) should never have a string trimmer used near the trunk. Mulches can also help reduce frost heaving of soils in the winter, which can damage new roots. Plus, as mulch decays, it provides valuable organic matter to the soil.

There are plenty of good reasons to use mulch in your landscape. Just make sure you apply it properly.

Question Corner

Answer provided by Tony Bratsch, horticulture educator

Q. I'd like to try growing some vegetables this fall. Can you offer some advice?

A. It's good that you're thinking about your fall vegetable garden now. "Cool-season" type vegetables perform best when harvested in the fall, but they must be started in the heat of late summer. The quality of fall vegetables is often superior to spring-sown crops that mature when temperatures are high and fluctuating in May and June. Fall veggies are also of higher quality for processing and storage.

Cool-season vegetables that perform well in Illinois' fall climate include the brassica crops: broccoli, kale, cauliflower, cabbage, Brussels sprouts, and kohlrabi. Spinach and carrots are also ideally grown in the fall months. Lettuce, snow peas, radishes, beets, turnips, and chard can be sown from late summer through early fall for harvesting—until a hard freeze occurs.

In Southern Illinois, sow brassicas in mid-August to target a mid- to late-fall harvest period (October to November). Some late varieties of Brussels sprouts have maturity times over 100 days and should be sown even earlier.

Garden centers don't often have broccoli, cauliflower, or cabbage transplants in the summer, so plants usually need to be started from seed. You can sow seeds directly in the permanent row and later thin them to an appropriate spacing.

A second method is to grow seedlings in a small transplant bed. Closely sow seeds in short rows, and later dig and transplant them to a prepared site. Seeding in a transplant bed is handy when summer vegetables are still occupying needed planting space. In the warm summer soil, seedlings will quickly emerge and grow, ready in four to six weeks.

Seedlings can be dug and planted bare-root, and should be kept moist until they establish in seven to 10 days. Keep in mind, transplanting will delay the harvest date compared to plants sown in place. For all brassicas, insects such as cabbage worm must be controlled in the transplant bed and after planting. Fall insect pressure can be intense until cooler temperatures and frost prevail. All brassicas tolerate moderate frost conditions, but should be covered when temperatures drop below 25 degrees.

Carrots can be sown in the latter part of August to early September. Compared to spring seeding, they will emerge quickly in warm summer soils. Keep the soil moist with light overhead watering until the seedlings emerge in five to seven days. When they are grown in the fall, carrots hold better in the soil, and they are sweeter. With a mulch cover, they can be harvested until the soil freezes.

Spinach is also best grown in the fall months when temperatures are cool and even, and days are shorter—which helps prevent bolting. Spring-sown spinach often becomes bitter and bolts.

Direct sow spinach from late August to early September. Gradually thin the stand, which will provide a continuous harvest through December. With protection of straw or a garden row cover, spinach will winter-over in the southern part of the state, enduring freezing temperatures. In the spring, it will begin to grow and provide a sweet, March/April harvest.

For more information, you may want to purchase a copy of *Vegetable Gardening in the Midwest*, available from your local U of I Extension office. You'll also find good reference material on the SI Gardening website, <http://web.extension.uiuc.edu/regions/hort>.



Send your lawn and garden questions to

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Japanese Beetles Are Here Again

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Japanese beetles are back in full force this summer. This destructive pest will feed on all kinds of plants including roses, zinnia, canna, viburnum, hibiscus, Shasta daisies, daylilies, birch, maple, linden, grapes, peaches, berries, and cherries.

Adult Japanese beetles are between 1/4 and 1/2 inch long. They have a metallic-green body with coppery wings. On either side of the wings are five tufts of white hairs.

For non-chemical control, you can knock adult beetles into containers of hot, soapy water. You'll need to repeat this procedure daily for several weeks.

Several insecticides can be used as knock-down sprays. The insecticide carbaryl, sold as Sevin, provides some of the best control. More than likely, you will have to repeat applications every three or four days

because new migrations of beetles occur daily. There are other products on the market as well. Just make sure you check the label for *Japanese Beetle* control. Read and follow all directions regarding application and timing of the product.

Japanese beetle traps are not recommended because they actually attract more beetles into the yard than they catch. In rural areas, traps can be placed a quarter mile from susceptible plantings.

Above all, maintain the health of the plant with proper watering and fertilization.

For more information, download our new *Japanese Beetle Fact Sheet* at <http://web.extension.uiuc.edu/regions/hort>. If you don't have internet access, contact your local U of I Extension office for a print copy.



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