

A few weeks ago I wrote about treating fungal problems in turf grass. One might recall I indicated the best control for turf grass fungus is through preventive measures rather than curative measures.

Unfortunately, the relentless high humidity experienced this past growing season in Central Nebraska has fostered a number of other fungal problems affecting other plant life, including herbaceous perennials. One usually tough perennial has fallen victim to fungus. That perennial is *Paeonia lactiflora*, more commonly known as peony. The fungal disease is powdery mildew.

Recently, I've been hearing the same question, "What is that white stuff covering the leaves on my peonies, and how do I get rid of it?" Interestingly, it, like fungus affecting turf grass, is also better controlled through preventive measures rather than curative ones. So what can a homeowner do now?



Powdery mildew is one of the most commonly found fungi affecting plants. This fungus typically appears as a white or grayish powder on the leaves and stems of plague-ridden plants. It affects a wide variety of deciduous plants. Lilac, beebalm and garden phlox have always been commonly affected perennials, but in recent years gardeners are reporting more and more cases of powdery mildew afflicting peonies.

The fact is, under natural growing conditions, the leaves of peonies normally look a bit bedraggled at this time of year. Sadly, their unsightliness is magnified if the plants were struck by powdery mildew. The good news is that powdery mildew on peonies is more of an eyesore than a health problem. However, severe cases of this chalky fungus can weaken the immune system in plants. If this is the case, it's best to remove the foliage now, before the leaves dry and fall to the ground. Dried, diseased leaves carry the spores (microscopic, seed-like structures) which could trigger next year's fungal outbreak. Removing old infected vegetation before it falls to the ground helps to mitigate the threat next season. If the leaves on peonies are still green and healthy, don't remove them until frost destroys them.

At the close of the growing season, herbaceous and intersectional peonies should be cut completely to the ground. Tree peonies should not be cut down. These peonies are woody-stemmed plants and bloom on "old wood." Like all woody-stemmed plants, they lose their

leaves after the first frost, but the branches and buds remain. If one has tree peonies, and they are infected with powdery mildew, thorough cleaning and removal of dead leaves is an absolute.

Perhaps, if one has been experiencing fungal outbreaks in peonies year after year, the following spring an application of a fungicide, such as Chlorothalonil, commonly called Daconil® could be applied when the new growth of young peony tips breaks through the ground. Follow two weeks later with another application and every fourteen days thereafter until mid-June. Keep in mind, fungicides work as preventives. One needs to spray *before* the leaves become infected. Spraying after will help keep the mildew from spreading to other parts of the plant but will not kill what has already grown.

Sometimes reoccurring outbreaks of powdery mildew can be attributed to the peony not being planted in the best location. Peonies planted in shaded, poorly-drained areas are much more prone to fungal infection. If this is the case, autumn is the ideal time to move peonies to a more suitable location. All types of peonies need adequate sunlight, well-drained soil and good air circulation to ensure healthy growth.

Yes, powdery mildew is a fungus, and when noticed on one's peonies, concern may arise. However, one must also realize, rarely is powdery mildew a life-threatening condition for the plant and, in time, as the old saying goes, "It, too, shall pass."