



Importance of Fall Sanitation

Many homeowners with fruit trees may have had issues with a fungus that causes brown rot. Brown rot of stone fruits such as peaches, apricots, and plums, is most noticeable in the spring and summer. Evidence of brown rot can first be seen on the developing flowers when they turn brown and begin to wither. On maturing fruit, brown rot starts as soft brown spots, and quickly spreads and causes the whole fruit to rot. As the fruit rots, it shrinks and becomes a wrinkled ‘mummy’ fruit. Often these mummified fruits fall from the trees onto the ground, but they can also stay attached to the tree. Brown rot fungus can also enter the fruiting branches through infected blossoms or fruit, or from wounds to the tree caused by hail, or even lawn mowers.

The fungus can overwinter in these mummy fruits if left on the ground or on the tree. The fungus can start producing spores in temperatures as cool as 32 degrees! These spores can then infect nearby fruit trees and the process continues. It’s best to prune off any broken or diseased branches, and remove the mummified fruits. Do NOT compost them – compost piles rarely get hot enough to kill the fungus spores. Fungicides are also an important aspect of keeping healthy trees from being infected. Fungicides will not cure a plant that’s been infected – they are preventative only. Each type of fruit tree responds differently to different fungicide applications, so be sure to follow the label directions!

Two other diseases that can overwinter are powdery mildew and leaf spots of tomatoes. Powdery mildew is most often seen on garden perennials such as phlox or bee balm. It looks like a light dusting of flour on the leaves. This disease usually doesn’t cause a lot of damage to the plants; it mostly affects how they look. It can cause plants to decline, though, if left unchecked. Remove plant material with signs of powdery mildew, or plant varieties that have better resistance to the disease (for examples of those, please contact me at the Extension office).

Leaf spots on tomatoes, on the other hand, can cause damage and needs to be treated. Any plant material, including the fruit, can harbor fungus spores that will overwinter in them. Clean up the garden and discard any infected plants. You can also till these plants into the soil.

Good sanitation is important with all of these plants. Remove damaged plant material, and keep a watchful eye for any sign of disease. Don’t allow plants to become stressed through too little water or too much fertilizer. Keep the garden clean now, and you’ll be rewarded with less disease next year!

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