

Lilacs Blooming and Leaf Browning
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Lilacs are a tough plant but they can have their share of issues. I've had a variety of questions related to lilac shrubs this summer.

One oddity is the sight of lilacs blooming now. While odd, it is not as weird as it seems. Spring blooming shrubs, like lilacs, produce their flower buds during summer and these buds are present on plants from now through winter. Stress, such as heat or drought, can trigger the flower buds to bloom out of season.

Blooming during fall is not harmful to shrubs and other flower buds on the plant will still bloom next spring. Since this can be a sign of plant stress, deep water lilacs and other shrubs to reduce stress. Do not fertilize with nitrogen. This can increase stress and promote growth that will not harden off before winter.

In the absence of rain, moisten soil 12 to 18 inches deep around trees and shrubs. Use a long screwdriver or dowel rod to check depth. Wait for the soil to dry before watering again. Fall is an important time to continue to water and we are still in abnormal to exceptional drought.

If considering pruning any spring blooming shrub at this time of year or during winter, know that spring blooming shrubs like lilac, forsythia, mock orange and weigela are best pruned after they bloom in spring to avoid removing flower buds present on plants.

If a shrub has become overgrown with many dead stems, it can be pruned near the ground in late winter. It won't bloom that spring but it will bloom in future springs.

Many dead stems in lilac can be a sign of shading from a lack of thinning stems when pruning, or a sign of lilac borers or scale insects. Borers attack stressed plants. Lilac borer adults lay their eggs near the base of lilac stems. After hatching, the larvae bores into the stem to feed, causing the stem to dieback.

Scale insects, such as oystershell scale, are sapsucking insects. They mass on the stems of lilacs and their feeding kills individual stems. These insects are protected by a scale covering and it may be assumed they are just a part of the bark. Stems heavily infested with scales are best pruned out.

Insecticide control for both insects needs to be done during spring. For borers, insecticides are applied to the base of stems during egg laying in early to mid-May. For scales, products need to be applied while these insects are in the crawler stage before they develop their protective covering, typically mid-May to June

Some lilacs have had severe leaf browning this year. This is likely the fungal disease *Pseudocercospora*. It shows up as brown spots on leaves, moving from leaf edges inward. The browning may also be splotchy.

This fungus can survive for at least two years on plant debris, so fall cleanup of infected lilac leaves will help reduce this disease next year.

If the disease was severe enough, a fungicide can be applied in spring as leaves are emerging. Use fungicides labeled for use on ornamental shrubs and follow label directions. If next spring is rainy, make repeat treatments until the rainy season is over.

For any foliar disease of shrubs, trees, fruit trees or other perennials, fungicides applied now will be a waste of money. If needed, make fungicide applications during spring to protect that year's leaves. This year's leaves have done their job for the summer and will soon drop off.

Also, fungicides will not kill the fungus present on the plant. These products work by preventing new infections on new leaves, and must be applied in spring, or during the infection period for any disease.