

Lilac Leaves Browning and Some Blooms

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Although a tough plant, lilacs are having their share of issues. Like last season, I've had a number of questions related to lilac leaves turning brown and a few questions about fall blooms.

Leaf browning is most likely due to one of two diseases. While it is too late this season to manage either disease, other than raking and removing fallen leaves for sanitation, identifying which disease a lilac has will help preparation for next season.

Lilac diseases we are seeing are bacterial leaf blight and *Pseudocercospora* leaf spot. It is important to distinguish between the two since one is bacterial and one is fungal. Management methods for these diseases are different.

Bacterial leaf blight infects new shoots and leaves in spring when weather is cool and rainy. Early symptoms are brown, water-soaked leaf spots. Over time, the brown spots enlarge and cause leaves to be blighted and misshapen.

The bacteria over winters in plant debris, healthy tissue, diseased cankers, perennial weeds, and soil. During wet spring weather, it spreads to new growth by wind, splashing rain, insect vectors, and pruning tools.

At this time of year, sanitation is the best management practice. Rake and remove fallen lilac leaves. Early next spring, removed diseased parts and thin lilacs with pruning to improve air circulation. In spring, dip pruners in a 10 percent bleach solution between each cut and prune only during dry weather and if no rain is expected in the next few days.

As a bacterial disease, fungicides are not effective. While there are chemical sprays available, they are not very feasible for homeowners to apply. A product needs to be applied thoroughly to the entire shrub in spring before the disease appears. Treatment needs to be repeated every 7 to 10 days, especially after rainfall. Sprays can also cause damage to some lilacs and complete disease control is not likely.

Pseudocercospora is a fungal disease. It shows up as brown spots on leaves, moving from leaf edges inward. Leaf browning may also be splotchy. The fungus can survive for at least two years on plant debris, so fall cleanup of infected lilac leaves will help reduce this disease each year.

If *Pseudocercospora* was severe enough, a fungicide could be applied in spring as leaves are emerging. It is important to use fungicides prior to much infection to be effective. 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.

And just a reminder that fungicides will not kill fungi present on the plant. These products work by preventing new infections on new leaves and must be applied in spring during the infection period to work. Fall sanitation, cleaning up fallen leaves, is the best practice to use now.

Blooms on lilac at this time of year is only a bit odd. Spring blooming shrubs, like lilacs, produce flower buds during summer and these buds are present on plants from late summer through winter. Stress, such as heat or drought, can trigger flower buds to bloom out of season.

Seeing some blooms during fall is not harmful to a shrub and other flower buds will bloom next spring. As this can be a sign of plant stress, deep water lilacs 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 to check depth. Wait for the soil to dry before watering again. Fall is an important time to continue to water trees and shrubs.