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What Is That Grayish White Material On My Plants?

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A weekly question/answer column

What Is That Grayish White Material On My Plants?

Scott Ockey answers:*

If you are noticing a thin layer of grayish white powdery material on rose bushes, vegetables, and other plants, it most likely a common plant disease called powdery mildew.

- Powdery mildew is caused by a fungus that saps the plant nutrients, causing distortion, discoloring, and often death of leaves and stems.
- Many species of powdery mildew have been identified and most are fairly specific. A species attacking one plant may not be able to infect other plant species.
- It may occur anytime during the growing season when rainfall or irrigation is high and the temperatures are between 70-80 degrees F, with humidity greater than 70 percent.
- Young tissue and overcrowded canopies are ideal areas for powdery mildew outbreaks to occur.
- Cultural controls of powdery mildew include: avoid excess nitrogen (nitrogen promotes new succulent growth); prune foliage to allow good air circulation thus lowering the humidity; water early in the morning so water can penetrate to the plant's root zone, and allow the surface soil to dry to keep the humidity low.
- Chemical controls can also be implemented. Ask your local nursery for information about the fungicides that are registered for powdery mildew on particular plants. Only apply fungicides registered for your plant and always read and follow the label directions.

* Scott Ockey is Utah State University Plant Disease Diagnostician