Listen to Your Garden

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What we need is a monitoring device for the yard and garden. It could work a little like a baby monitor. A little speaker would sit next to your bed at night to alert you if any evil pests dared to venture onto your property. During the night, a small device would signal, “Warning!, slugs approaching the tomatoes.”

“But, for now, the best monitoring device for my yard is a simple stroll through the landscape every evening or two,” says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. “If I simply pay attention to certain areas, and know what to look for, I notice most infestations while they are small and easy to control. If I forget, and only venture out into the garden once every week or two, what was a small problem has become gigantic and is much harder to control.”

One trick with monitoring is knowing where to look, and what the damage looks like, he explains. It is obvious that we look for plants that appear damaged. Some pests eat chunks out of leaves, soft herbaceous growth and even wood. Examine the leaves - especially those close to the ground.

Slugs and snails normally take bites out of the leaves in their territory, Goodspeed says. They often eat the margins of the leaves, leaving only the veins and stalks in their wake. They also may leave a slimy trail, but not always. Since they feed at night, they are usually off sleeping, oblivious to our fretting about the damage during the day.

Other night feeders are the black root weevils, he adds. This group of nasty insects removes perfect little semi-circular shapes around the edges of many plants. Their damage begins to appear this time of year. The adults and larva live in the soil and the black adults come out to feed at night. Grasshoppers are another common leaf-eater. They consume nearly anything that is in their path including berries, small trees and napping dogs. Normally they are out doing their damage throughout the day, where we can see them.

“Feel the leaves of the plants while strolling through the yard,” Goodspeed says. “If they are sticky, aphids are probably to blame. They also roll the leaves as they begin to feed. This is another symptom to look for on the plants. Aphids do not bite, but they do suck on plants. The ground may also be a little sticky under a tree that has an aphid infestation.”
Mites are another sucking insect, he says. However, they do not normally leave a sticky mess as they eat. Mite damage is evident when the leaves start to turn yellow, rust or another off color. If you suspect mite damage, simply hold a white piece of paper under the leaves and shake them a little. If the small dots appear on the paper start to move, chances are they are mites.

Occasionally, you may spot some leaves that are beginning to wilt, Goodspeed says. This can be an indication that the plants are either getting too much or too little water. Dig around the base of the plant to check the moisture level and condition of the roots. If the soil is bone dry three to four inches down, more water may be needed. If the soil is damp, the plant may be suffering from root rot or another problem associated with overwatering. Often the soil will even smell a little musty and old. Cut into a root and examine it. It should be firm and white. If it is soft or mushy, with brown, purple or black streaks, it is rot. Let the soil dry out and adjust your watering schedule.

Another problem with overwatering is it contributes to iron chlorosis, he adds. This is most noticeable on the newer leaves of the plants. They turn a yellowish color while the veins remain green. Examine both the newer and older leaves to see if there is any difference in their color and growth.

Look for other plants that appear to be off-colored, Goodspeed says. Compare them with similar, healthy plants. Monitoring the landscape regularly makes it easier to notice any change in appearance. It is also much easier to control a pest problem while it is still small and before it gets out of hand.

For more information, contact your local USU County Extension office.