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Diagnosing a Sick Plant

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GARDEN NOTES

DIAGNOSING A SICK PLANT

By Dennis Hinkamp

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“Sometimes, here at the office, I feel like a phone psychic,” says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. “I receive calls from distraught plant owners trying to determine what is wrong with their plant. I answer the phone and hear, ‘I have a sick plant.’”

“I am tempted to say (in my best phone psychic voice), I see the dreaded and rare Leaf-and-Root Disease. Quarantine the plant and then destroy it. I also see a large maple in your future.

“Instead, I begin asking a series of questions to determine the symptoms of their ailing plant,” Goodspeed says. “If I ask enough of the right questions, I can usually diagnose the curse causing the difficulty and tell them how they can exorcize it.”

“Often, as the plant owners begin answering my questions, they start thinking through the problem, and sometimes solve it themselves. Usually, asking the right questions, then making a few good observations is the key to solving these problems.”

If you want to become a plant detective, start by examining your watering habits, he suggests. Most people believe they water everything perfectly, but it is consistently the number one problem with plants. Generally it is because the plant is getting too much water, but occasionally it gets too little. Find out how often, how deeply and how much water is being applied.

“Many people who bring me their plants are stymied by these questions,” he says. “This tells me they don’t have a clue as to whether watering is the culprit or not. It’s a good idea to dig around in the soil and find out how watering has affected the plant. How deep does the water penetrate the soil after running the sprinklers? Does the soil have a chance to start drying before more water is applied? Are the roots water logged, rotting and dying?”

After finding out a little about the watering practices, the next series of questions should deal with the soil, he adds. Is it mostly clay or sand? Is there a slope that inhibits water penetration? Is there a hard pan a few inches below the surface?

After learning something about the soil, continue your investigation with a few questions about the plant itself, Goodspeed says. Each plant has a select group of diseases and insects that commonly cause them problems. This narrows down the possible list of suspects from a couple

of million to a just a few.

Look around the garden and yard to see if only one type of plant is being affected or if the damage is widespread, affecting many different types of plants, he says. Insects and diseases are selective as to which plants they attack. Watering and other environmental problems often affect several types of plants.

Find out how quickly the problem is spreading, or if there was a particular time of year when it first showed up, he continues. The key to being a good diagnostician is being observant and taking the time to examine neighboring plants to see if they are also affected.

If the problem is with a tree, look at the other trees in the neighborhood to see if they are having the same problem, Goodspeed says. Find out how old the tree is, and how long it has been in the ground. A newly planted tree can have different problems than one that has been growing in the same spot for 20 years.

The more you know about the plant, the fewer psychic powers you will need, he says. Do a little investigative work before you call the doctor.

For more information, contact your local [USU County Extension office](#).

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