Friday’s Feature
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Black sooty mold is a sign of an insect infestation

At certain times of the year, particularly during the summer months, you might notice a plant or two in your landscape where the leaves are covered with a dark black coating. If the coating rubs off on your fingers, the culprit is most likely a type of mildew commonly known as black sooty mold.

Sooty mold is not considered a plant pathogen and does not directly harm the plant. It can, however, indirectly affect plants by shading the leaves which interferes with photosynthesis, potentially slowing plant growth and reducing the long-term vigor of the plant.

Where does it come from?
Sooty mold is actually a sign of an insect infestation. Sucking insects such as soft scales, mealybugs, aphids, whiteflies and treehoppers suck nutrients from plants by tapping into the plant’s vascular system with their thread-like mouthparts. They feed on the plant’s liquid and nutrients, thereby "starving" the twigs and branches that eventually shrivel and die.

These sucking insects filter out the nitrogen components of the sap and excrete the excess water and sugary components onto leaves, driveways and whatever is nearby. Their excretions are called honeydew because
of the sticky nature of the fluid.

Honeydew seems like a strange name for a waste product that comes out the back-end of an insect. Nevertheless, it provides an ideal substrate for the black sooty mold to colonize.

Other insects, such as yellow jackets and bees, hovering around the affected shrub can also be an indication of a sucking insect infestation, as they are attracted to the sweet honeydew also.

**What to do?**
To successfully get rid of the sooty mold, your strategy should be directed towards the insect, not the mildew.

First, correctly identify the sucking insect and evaluate their population. Remember, having a few pest insects in the landscape will actually provide food for the beneficial insects. You never know, you may not have to do anything if the right types of beneficial insects are present.

However, if the sucking pest population becomes overwhelming, you may need to treat.

Sprays of insecticidal soaps and/or horticultural oils can be very effective in controlling soft bodied sucking insects. Other products are also effective in controlling these insects. Always remember to read the label of the product you are using first. Try to avoid using broad-spectrum insecticides if possible since these kill beneficial insects that prey on pest insects. Contact your local Extension Office for help in determining the correct control option.

Ant management is a new twist when dealing with these plant pests. Ants like sweets and the more honeydew producers (think of the sucking insects as little candy factories) the better. Ants actually herd the sucking pests and move them to other plants and to start a new infestation. The ants guard the honeydew producers and fend off predators and parasites from attacking the defenseless and nonchalant plant sucking insects.

If ants are an issue, use ant bait stations, placed away from the house, but near the shrub beds to minimize ants setting up new “candy factories” on your plants by moving these little suckers around. Once there are no ants, the natural predators and parasites of the pest insects will be better able to keep the aphids, scale and whiteflies under control.
Theresa Friday is the Environmental Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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