

COLUMNS

Is powdery mildew taking over your garden plants? Here's the fix.

Campbell Vaughn Augusta Chronicle

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Key Points

- It often affects woody plants like crape myrtles and dogwoods, as well as various perennials and vegetables.
 - Preventative measures include thinning vegetation for better airflow and avoiding overhead watering.
 - Fungicides can be effective if applied early, but it is important to follow label instructions, especially for edible plants.
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We went from bone dry to soaking wet in a matter of days. I got nearly 5 inches of rain over Memorial Day weekend.

The humidity is high, and the nights are relatively cool, so conditions are just right for our annual spring powdery mildew invasion.

That chalky, dusty, grayish white stuff growing on your crape myrtle or dogwood is a fungus called powdery mildew. It is fairly common this time of year, but it will be a little extra for now. Folks have sent me a lot of pictures lately, and it's all over the place.

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I have a friend and former University of Georgia professor, Jean Williams-Woodward, who is an ornamental plant pathologist superstar. Jean does a great job of describing some of the characteristics of powdery mildew: "Powdery mildew is the presence of whitish fungal growth on the surfaces of leaves, stems, and flowers. Infection of young, expanding leaves or shoots can result in severe distortion. There are many different fungi in the powdery mildew group; some are quite host-specific, while others can infect a wide range of plants. The fungi obtain nutrients from host plants by penetrating the outermost layer of plant cells. Powdery mildew spores are easily dispersed by air currents to surrounding plants, infecting plants of the same species. Unlike most fungal diseases, leaf wetness is not required for powdery mildew infection."

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It happens most of the time when it starts getting warmer, drier, and high humidity. Then the subsequent cooler, moist nights really get the fungus moving.

Powdery mildew is common on woody plants like roses, crape myrtles, dogwoods, and I have often seen it on mophead hydrangeas. On perennials, it is often seen on verbena, gerbera, and phlox.

On vegetables, take your pick. I drive down Skinner Mill Rd about five times a week, and there is a row of crape myrtles that will always tell me when and how bad powdery mildew is going to be this year. And as of my drive this week, the crape myrtles in question are 6 out of 10 bad on my weekly mildew inspection.

There are some things we can do to prevent it. Thinning thick vegetation areas to allow for better air flow can help. Remove severely affected branches to reduce the disease pressure, as well as remove any leaf matter

under the plant that might be harboring the fungus. Overhead irrigation can help splatter the spores, so if you can irrigate at the base of the plant, that will help.

I am a proponent of using fungicide on powdery mildew if you can catch it early enough. Daconil, with the active ingredient chlorothalonil, is a good contact product that has been in the gardener's arsenal for years. I also like the systemic fungicide made by Spectracide called Immunox with the active ingredient myclobutanil.

Both of these products are great if you catch the fungus early. I also like them because they are safe for vegetables if you follow the label. The label will tell you everything you need to know about how the fungicide works, including how soon you can eat that squash after it has been sprayed.

Try to mix the application of these products if you have persistent issues with powdery mildew, because they can build resistance when you continually use the same product over and over.