

ASK THE EXPERT

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Rhododendron dieback

Problem: Rhododendron plants in some of our clients' properties are showing twig dieback in random places. This problem is more prevalent than in previous years. What do you think the problem is, and how do we manage it? (Pennsylvania)

Solution: It would be difficult to diagnose problems without much background information and/or on-site inspection. Based on your field observation, the problem may be related to borer insect damage, canker disease, root rot or abiotic disorders.

Look for any holes on plants indicative of borer damage. Where rhododendron borers are active, plants may appear drought-stressed. Look for holes in bark often present at limb crotches. Another pest, rhododendron stem borer, also can cause twig dieback. In this case, look for clusters of small holes in twigs and stems.

Applying insecticides such as Dursban during mid-May and again in mid-June should help manage these pests. Sex pheromone traps may also be useful to provide timely treatments.

Twig dieback and discoloration may also be due to canker-causing fungi such as *Botryosphaeria ribis*. Prune and destroy infected plant parts. Prune when dry, and disinfect tools in Lysol, rubbing alcohol or Clorox (1:4 dilution) to minimize disease spread. Last year, we saw a number of plants with this problem.

Diebacks can also be caused by *Phytophthora* spp. Prune affected plant parts when dry. As new leaves emerge, treat with mancozeb, three times at 7- to 10-day intervals, or apply Subdue or Aliette as a soil drench to manage this disease.

Last year, some rhododendrons showed dieback without any insect or disease activity. This was attributed to abiotic disorder, particularly the moisture stress due to severe drought. Provide selective pruning of dead branches, fertilize, water and use pest management controls as needed to improve plant life.

Controlling turf insects

Problem: When is the best time to apply insect control to turf? (New York)

Solution: Your question doesn't refer to any specific insect control. Therefore, I am going to discuss the topic in general.

The best time to treat for insect control, in general, would be when the insects are active during the growing season. Types of insect problems, their activity period and the number of generations per year may vary from one region to another.

Knowing pest activity period, damaging stage(s) and the life cycle are necessary in dealing with pest problems.

Based on their inhabiting and/or feeding activity, most of the common destructive turf pests in your area can be grouped into surface- and subsurface-feeding insects. Among the surface-feeding insects, the most common pests in lawns will be chinch

bugs, sod webworms and billbugs. Occasionally, you may also find cutworms, armyworms, etc.

As mentioned earlier, insecticides usually are applied during the pest's peak activity period, for economic and practical reasons.

For sod webworms and chinch bugs, this would be during May and June. Reports suggest that the most ideal time for sod webworm control would be 10 to 15 days after observing the adult moths flying over lawns at dusk. During this period, eggs dropped by the female moths hatch and young larvae are susceptible to the insecticide treatment. Sod webworm larvae hide in the thatch inside a cocoon during daytime and feed at night at the base of tillers, without killing the crown. Turf generally recovers with the onset of good weather and adequate moisture.

Chinch bugs go through five developmental stages of nymphs prior to becoming adults. Because of overlapping generations, you may expect to find any of these stages. All stages feed on turf; therefore, applying insecticides during their peak activity (May and June) should provide adequate control. During feeding, the chinch bugs secrete toxic materials and kill the turf. Severely damaged areas may require seeding.

Although billbug larvae also actively feed during May and June, treatment during this period may not give satisfactory results. Research indicates that billbug larvae—soil-inhabiting, root-feeding pests—are difficult to control. A report from the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center (OARDC) suggests treating in mid-April for billbug adult control before they have a chance to lay eggs, which eliminates or minimizes future generations.

Billbug adults feed on turfgrass leaves and make C-shaped notching. The eggs deposited in the tillers hatch into legless larvae which tunnel down through the tiller and crown to the soil and become root-feeding, subsurface pests. Affected turfgrass will be killed and requires seeding.

When dealing with subsurface, root-feeding white grubs, such as Japanese beetle, European chafer, May-June beetle, masked chafer, etc., you can control with insecticides either in spring or fall. In the spring, grubs are difficult to control because they are more mature and have a short feeding period before becoming pupae and adults. Therefore, materials should be applied early in the life cycle to get satisfactory results. The best time to treat for grubs would be during July or August, or later in the fall when young grubs feed for two to three months. Untreated, they eventually mature and move deep into the soil as its temperature drops below 55° in the fall. Severely affected areas may require seeding.

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Questions should be mailed to ASK THE EXPERT, LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT, 7500 Old Oak Boulevard, Cleveland, OH 44130. Please allow 2 to 3 months for an answer to appear in the magazine.