

Plant Problem Diagnostics



It happens all the time. The phone rings and the person on the other end wants to know what's wrong with his tree. He says it's doing this or that . . . turning yellow . . . or dropping leaves . . . or. It can be any of a seemingly endless list of alleged abnormalities.

And once in a while the "problem" turns out not really a problem after all, such as interior needle browning on pines. Periodically they shed old needles and that's the way they do it.

But more often something really is wrong and the big question is *What?* For diagnostics, the first thing to know is that all plant problems always fall into one of only two large categories: 1) Biotic, meaning *living*, and 2) Abiotic, meaning *non-living*.

But after that, it can become complicated because landscapes are infinitely variable and because problem symptoms can result from multiple present causes, frequently with the first causal factor opening the way for others that follow. So the universal general prescription for problem prevention is

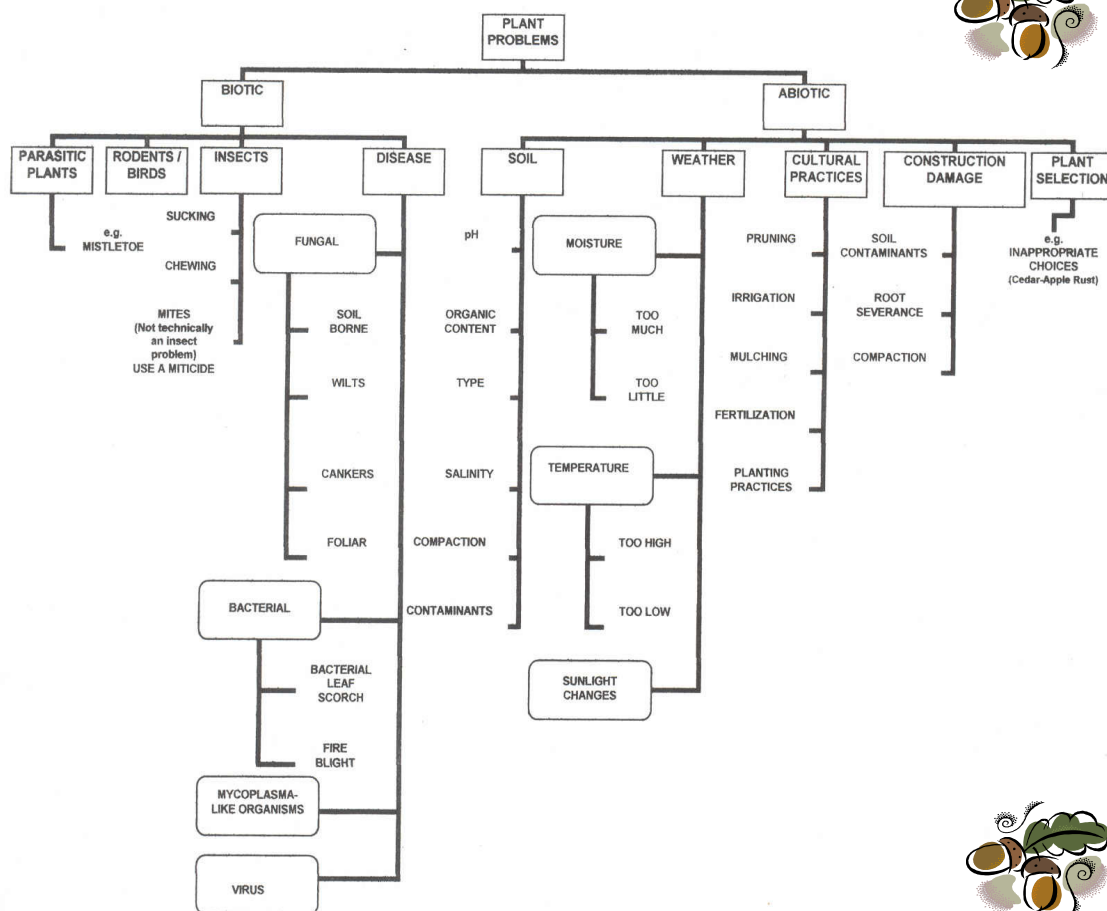
plant selection and good cultural practices that foster on-going vitality and plant health.

In many cases, plants or trees with insect or pathogenic disease (biotic) issues came into that state largely as a result of poor cultural practices, weather, environmental disturbance, soil conditions, etc. (all abiotic).

The following schematic may be helpful in seeing the general relationship between these classes and in providing a checklist for diagnostics. More often, abiotic issues precede biotic, rather than the other way around. This then restates our original premise: Strong healthy and happy plants can generally repel insect and disease assaults more effectively, just as a healthy person is more likely to "throw off" a cold.

Another helpful conclusion may be this one: For biotic problems, physical (i.e. visual) evidence is usually present and biotic problems are usually more progressive in their spread and more limited to particular species or families of plants.

SOURCES OF PLANT PROBLEMS



From My Journal: Ode To A Porch



They'd lived in this house for over twenty years now. When they'd first arrived, back out to the country as he'd envisioned it then, the move had somehow seemed a virtual necessity in order to provide for the kids a proper place to grow up. And in those days, in his own mind, "proper" had also meant a place similar to the virtual wonderland that he remembered from his own boyhood, when bushel baskets of peas were shelled on farm porches by neighbors gathered round in gregarious friendly circles of straight back chairs. There had been little effort then at the time of the moving to factor in to that tenuous equation two probably very critical differences; the times and the fact that he and his brother had been two rambunctious adventure-loving boys at the zenith of their imaginative powers, whereas his own children were all girls of an entirely different mindset and orientation, in a very different era. But those twenty years had nonetheless been very good, very precious years.

Now that the kids were all grown and away, his wife had now and again mentioned moving back to town, back to a smaller place, she'd said, where the domestic work load associated with the increasing maintenance requirements of a twenty-plus year old house on eight acres would not loom so large. But he had resisted her lobbying, at least so far. And he thought he knew why. He was still in love with that old indelible dream and with the trees and the deer that they still watched on many mornings from their breakfast table window. And then there was also just the horrific chore of the moving itself, to what seemed must somehow now inevitably be a smaller heart place.

But maybe more than anything else, he resisted because he did not want to have to say goodbye to his porch, his own special place of inspiration. Over those twenty years that porch, the one

that he had originally envisioned in his mind as a relatively young man of forty, had evolved even beyond his ability to foresee, into a personal treasure. It was wrap-around on three sides of their house. And wide! Eight feet wide with cedar columns and rails that defined it. He'd occasionally thought that it should have been even wider still, but it had turned out just fine. And everyone who came to visit and sat there under the fans, looking out into the green foliage that blocked any and all evidence of mankind beyond, remarked to them that they may not

frame for an hibernal fire pan around which he met across the firelight with his band of brothers, sharing good cigars, good brandy and good conversation in the darkness of the colder months then morphed back again to a glass top table in the springtime, just right for propping your feet. In his journals he had in recent years begun referring to that special shaded southwest corner as his writing porch, for it was there that his best ideas seemed to come. He told many that of all the rooms in the house, that corner on the porch was his favorite room, where the sweet zephyrs of dusk seemed to always arrive just in time, caressing his brow with inspiration.

True, he very seldom any more tramped the once-upon-a-time fields outlying his own acres of green. In disturbingly large chunks, those fields and wooded tracts had in recent years slowly and sadly . . . but maybe inevitably . . . been devolving into somehow sad cookie-cutter subdivisions. Yet he still did tramp those fields in his mind as he circumnavigated the edge of his gin glass with his

finger, listening to the summer dusk serenade of the whippoorwills, punctuated as it was now and then with the rat-tat-tat of a local woodpecker.

So then a house without a commodious shady porch seemed to him then an almost pitiful and impoverished thing, no matter the other amenities it may offer. A house without a porch suggested an almost stifling isolation, a turning inside that held the power to slowly quash one's soul, even amidst its sterile and distracting modern comforts.

Yes, there were always porches attached to the *best* houses; always to the ones in the old Andy Hardy movies. And of course there was Isak Dinesen's Elysian farmhouse porch in Africa . . . a glorious one he'd visited only in his

(Continued on page 3)



realize just how fortunate they were to be living there. So many had come and sat for hours, filling their lives with memories.

And over the years it had only gotten better, sweeter, as his wife through the passing seasons somehow knew exactly how to add just the right touches to progressively increase its magic. A table here and a pair of facing wicker chairs there, evocative statuary flanking trellised potted plants, all added their own little nuance to a haunting almost jungle-like scene extracted somehow right out of an old Sidney Greenstreet movie. Multiple wind chimes, of which the last was by far the best, offered large, rich and melodious accompaniment to his own still-young inspirations. The round

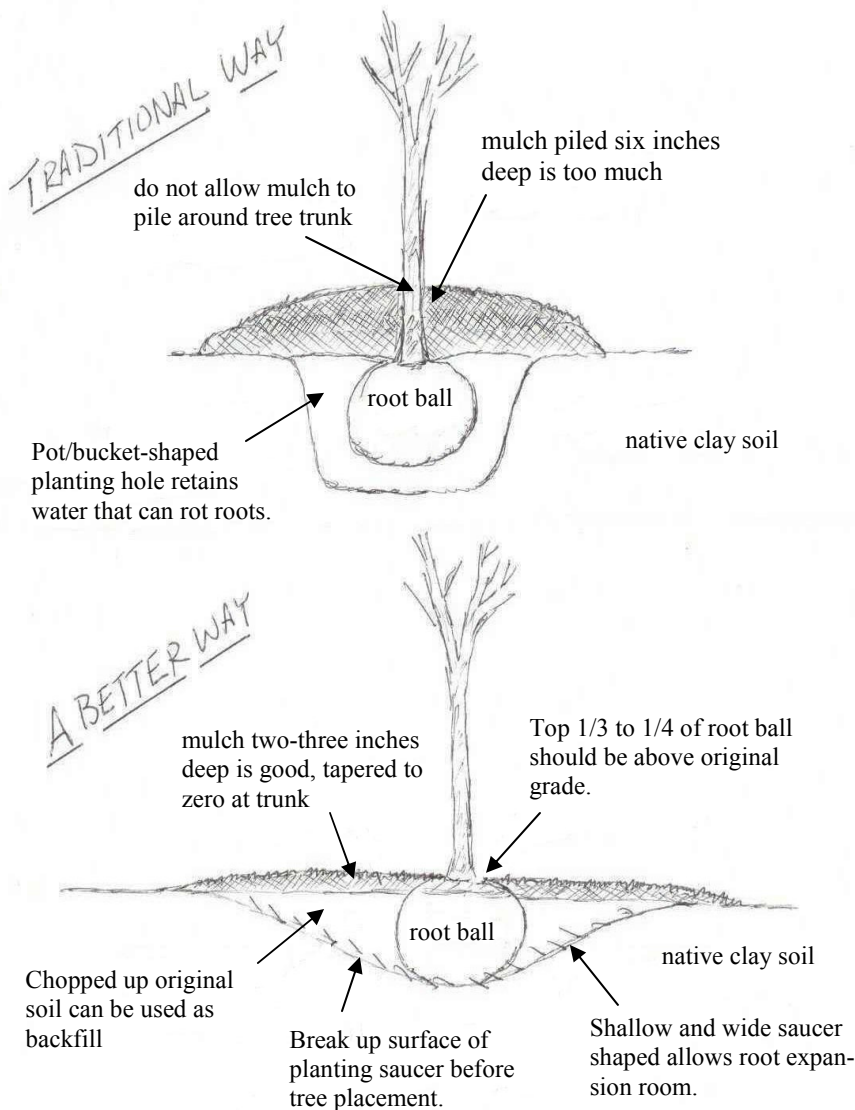


imagination, seen only in photographs; a porch maybe rightfully elevated even to veranda status, providing full justification for his architectural lust. But then that was the way it was; a virtual given because porches were then and, he thought, should be still the places where civilized people think and tell stories and write and live their lives. They seemed to him to rightfully be the epicenter of "home."

Tree Planting Time Is About Now . . . And How To

In the last issue I discussed briefly a better way to insure success when planting a new tree. I now want to draw you a picture since it's rumored that a picture is worth a thousand words. In fact below I've drawn **two** pictures of a hypothetical new tree, one put in the wrong way, the old traditional way, and the other installed more correctly for native **clay** soil. So take a close look at those illustrations and the notes with them to get a clear idea about how to get that new install going in the right direction.


In a previous article on mulches and mulching, I talked about using good mulch, but not too much. Mulch piled volcano-style around a new trunk six inches deep **is too much!** This mistake retains moisture on the lower trunk and facilitates root and collar problems.



Porch Poetry

Still . . . sitting in the autumn dusk,
Listening
Whippoorwills somewhere out there
In the twilight
Of the soon coming night,
Calling to each other
And to me
Here on my porch;
The porch of my best years,
My best days
Days of understanding . . . of listening
To birds in the night
And to my heart.
Still . . . sitting in the autumn dusk
Looking for that window here,
A magic window
That overlooks another place
And another time.
Like Alladin's carpet
My satchel comes here with me
Holding all the tools I need
To travel light and travel far;
A pen
A pad
A book of magic phrases,
Beautiful words,
A journal
That measures time
And gauges memories
Sweeter each time I take them out
To turn and admire,
To savor and enjoy,
Then replace into my book
In a slightly different way,
Sometimes juxtaposed
Sometimes linear
Always treasured
For themselves
And for their brethren, the ideas
That sparkle in their settings
In the stories
Like diamonds in a ring,
Offering memory and imagination
Anticipation and life!



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Did You Know. . . .

. . . **that** if you have missed back issues of this newsletter and would like to catch up, it is possible to review the content of those issues and then if you like download them from our website. You can elect to download entire specific issues or other individual articles or information on specific concerns. We are continually expanding that information library as time passes. Kim reminds me to tell you that the first time you download an entire newsletter the process can be slow, due to the size of the download and the photos that are included. Be patient. Subsequent downloads are said to be faster.



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. . . **that** in order to begin a gall eradication program for your infested oak trees you will need to call the office and get on our January treatment list. I have published subsequent articles on this problem. The Winter '06 issue of this letter discusses this concern in

Is Something Wrong With Your Pin Oak?



Sometimes irregularities and odd behavior symptoms appear in a season and then for reasons not always entirely understood, seem to just "fade away" again. If that's your case, that may be very good news. However there are two diseases that, if present, are not so likely to fade away. One of them, bacterial leaf scorch (*Xyllela fastidiosa*) usually appear in mid to late summer and kills limbs gradually by attrition over a multi-year period. There is no cure. Symptoms are the partial browning of leaves at the leaf margin, frequently with a yellow or red-brown band between the brown and green parts of the leaf. A lab test may be necessary for positive confirmation.

The second is another incurable fungal pathogen disease called oak wilt (*Ceratocystis fagacearum*) that will finish the job rapidly, usually in one season, leaving gray to black mycelial pads under the cracked dry bark. It is important to remove oaks with these symptoms promptly in order to prevent infection spread to adjacent healthy oaks via the disease's beetle vectors or by root grafting.

Early identification is important because both of these diseases produce symptoms that can be mimicked by abiotic situations, including water, soil, and herbicide issues. (Herbicide damage will also frequently exhibit deformed rolling leaves.) Also, abiotic causes usually do not produce the leaf coloration so often seen with the two above. Uncomplicated and less severe abiotic problems alone are not necessarily fatal if identified and dealt with in time. (see the front page article and diagnostic chart)