

## Black, Sooty Mold on Landscape Plants

### What is this black, sooty mold on my landscape plants?

At certain times of the year, particularly during the summer months, you are bound to notice a plant or two in your landscape that has a black fungus growing on the leaves. The culprit is none other than *Capnodium*, a type of fungus commonly known as black sooty mold. Sooty mold appears as a black staining or powdery coating on leaves and stems. While the black leaves may become unsightly, sooty mold itself does not directly harm the plant. Instead the black fungus affects the plant indirectly by shading the leaves which interferes with photosynthesis, potentially slowing plant growth and reducing the long-term vigor of the plant.



Figure 1: Sooty mold on holly, resulting from a Florida wax scale infestation.

### Where does it come from?

Sooty mold grows on a substance called “honeydew” which is excreted from certain insects such as aphids, soft scales, whiteflies and mealybugs. These insects feed on a variety of landscape plants and can be found on the leaves and stems where they use special mouthparts to pierce plant tissues and suck out the juices from within. During this time these insects excrete large amounts of a sticky, sugary substance commonly called “honeydew”. The excreted honeydew coats leaves, stems, and fruit, stimulating the growth of sooty mold.

## Honeydew Producing Insects



Figure 2: Mealybugs.



Figure 3: Hemispherical scale on coontie.



Figure 4: Florida wax scales along leaf veins.



Figure 5: Whitefly adult (left) resembling a moth and immature nymphs (right) which resemble scale insects.



Figure 6: Aphids feeding on a plant stem.

## How can I get rid of the black mold?

Before you run out to purchase a fungicide to rid your plant of the black sooty mold, there is something you should know. The black mold will only go away once the insect pest is controlled. To rid your plants of these insects, you can spray them with an insecticidal soap or lightweight horticultural oil such as neem oil. Be sure to spray all parts of the plant, including the undersides of the leaves, and follow the label directions, repeating the treatment as directed on the label or at weekly intervals as necessary.

Sooty mold usually weathers away following control of the insect infestation through the actions of sun, rain, and wind. Sprays of insecticidal soaps and/or horticultural oils used for control of these insects also help to loosen and remove sooty mold. Other products are also effective in controlling these insects but before purchasing a product, determine which insect is causing the problem and 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 these pests.



Figure 7: Cottony cushion scale crawlers (immature scales) on sooty mold-covered adults.

### Available Products\*

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| Neem Oil<br>(Aphids, Whiteflies)          | Bonide Safer BioNeem®<br>Green Light Neem®<br>Green Light Rose Defense®<br>Southern Ag Triple Action Neem Oil® |
| Paraffinic Oil<br>(Aphids, Whiteflies)    | Bonide All Seasons Horticultural and Dormant Spray Oil®<br>SunSpray Horticultural Oil®                         |
| Fish Oil<br>(Scales & Mealybugs)          | Organocide®  |
| Horticultural Oil<br>(Scales & Mealybugs) | Volvk®   |
| Potassium Salts                           | Safer's Insecticidal Soap®   |

## How can I prevent further infestations?

Our cultural practices in the landscape can help prevent further insect and sooty mold infestations. Over-pruning, over-watering and fertilizing can stimulate the growth of succulent new plant tissues, which is particularly appetizing for these insects. Established plants in the landscape shouldn't need much (if any) supplemental water or fertilizer and pruning during the dormant season (January to February) will prevent the stimulated growth of new shoots.

In addition to cultural practices, early detection and control of the insect pest will halt further development of the sooty mold fungus. Even if you aren't observing the black sooty mold on your plants, ants may be one of the first signs that you may have a problem with a honeydew-producing insect. Ants feed on the honeydew and will actually help to guard these pests from predators. Therefore, when ants are observed, plants should be examined closely for these pests. Also, scouting your landscape often and spot treating pests as soon as you see them will prevent heavy infestations and save you the headache of having to treat large areas.

While our cultural practices may not completely eliminate our insect pest and sooty mold problems, they will, along with scouting and spot-treating, help keep insect populations lower and more manageable during the summer months when this is a common problem.



Figure 8: Ants eat insect honeydew and are a sign of a pest infestation.

\*Note: Identifying the pest should be your first step to controlling it. While pictures of aphids, scales, whiteflies and mealybugs are pictured in the publication and control measures are all similar in nature, not all species of these insects look alike and some look very similar to beneficial insects. For instance, aphids can be found in an array of colors, including red, orange, green, yellow, and black. Scale insects vary in shape, size, and color and armored scales do not produce honeydew like soft scales. Certain species of ladybug larvae resemble mealybug pests but are actually beneficial since they eat aphids. If you need assistance identifying an insect in your landscape, please contact the Baker County Extension Office or your local county Extension office for assistance.

\* The use of trade names is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee of warranty of the products names and does not signify they are approved to the exclusion of others of suitable comparison.

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