

What's wrong with my plant?

A printable one-pager covering the 20 most common outdoor plant problems in suburban gardens. Every diagnosis cites a primary source — UC IPM, Cornell Cooperative Extension, Missouri Botanical Garden, Penn State Extension, Clemson HGIC, Rutgers NJAES.

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LEAF SYMPTOMS

Yellowing older leaves first	Nitrogen deficiency or natural seasonal shedding Side-dress with balanced fertilizer or compost. Late-season yellowing of old leaves is normal. Source: Cornell Coop. Extension
Yellowing between green veins on new growth	Iron chlorosis (alkaline soil) Lower soil pH with garden sulfur (long-term). Chelated iron foliar spray for quick green-up. Common on hydrangea, gardenia, rhododendron. Source: Missouri Botanical Garden
All leaves yellow, no clear pattern	Overwatering or root rot Check drainage. Soil should not stay soggy. If crown smells sour, root rot is established — hard to reverse. Source: Cornell Coop. Extension
Brown crispy leaf edges in heat	Drought / heat scorch Deep-water once or twice a week. Mulch 2-3" to retain moisture. Afternoon shade for sensitive plants. Source: NC State Extension
Brown edges on broadleaf evergreens after winter	Winter desiccation (windburn) Plant out of wind. Apply anti-desiccant spray late fall. Burlap windbreaks in zones 5-6. Source: Penn State Extension
White powdery coating on leaves	Powdery mildew (fungal) Improve airflow. Water at base only. Sulfur or potassium bicarbonate preventatively. Remove infected leaves. Source: UC IPM
Black spots with yellow halos (roses)	Black spot fungus Water at base only. Prune for airflow. Choose resistant cultivars. Neem oil as protectant. Source: Cornell Coop. Extension
Orange pustules on leaf undersides	Rust fungus Remove infected leaves. Avoid overhead watering. Sulfur spray prevents spread but not cure. Source: Missouri Botanical Garden

PEST DAMAGE

Lacy skeletonized leaves (June-Aug)	Japanese beetles Hand-pick into soapy water in cool morning. Milky spore for lawn grubs. DO NOT use beetle traps. Source: Penn State Extension
Irregular holes with silvery slime trails	Slugs or snails Iron phosphate bait (Sluggo) when night temps hit 50°F. Hand-pick at night. Beer traps work. Source: Clemson HGIC
Stems chewed cleanly overnight	Deer browse Repellent rotation (Liquid Fence, Plantskydd, Bobbex). 7-foot fence for high pressure. Switch to deer-resistant species. Source: Rutgers NJAES
Fine stippling, "sandblasted" look	Spider mites (heat-stressed plants) Hose foliage forcefully (top and bottom). Insecticidal soap for severe cases. Avoid neonics — worsen outbreaks. Source: UC IPM
White cottony tufts on stems/joints	Mealybugs or scale Dab with rubbing alcohol on Q-tip. Horticultural oil dormant spray. Prune severe infestations. Source: UC IPM

BLOOM & STRUCTURE

Hydrangea has leaves but no flowers	Wrong-time pruning or winter bud kill (H. macrophylla) Macrophylla blooms on old wood — prune right after flowering, never in winter/spring. Switch to paniculata for reliable bloom. Source: Penn State Extension
Peony grows but doesn't bloom	Planted too deep (#1 cause) Eyes (pink growing points) must sit no more than 1 inch below soil surface. Lift and replant if needed. Source: Clemson HGIC
Sudden one-branch wilt on tree	Verticillium wilt (soil fungus) Peel bark on wilted branch — dark streaks confirm. No cure. Prune affected branches. Replace with resistant species. Source: Missouri Botanical Garden
Wilting with wet soil	Root rot (Phytophthora/Pythium) Stop watering. Improve drainage. Mushy crown that smells sour = established rot. Hard to save. Source: UC IPM
Buds form, never open ("bud blast")	Late frost, water stress, or excessive shade Common on peony. Site selection (6+ hrs sun). Deep watering during bud development. Source: Missouri Botanical Garden

VEGETABLE PROBLEMS

Black leathery rot on tomato bottoms

Blossom end rot (calcium uptake, NOT disease)

Consistent watering. Deep mulch. Calcium sprays don't fix it. Soil calcium is usually fine — it's an irrigation issue.

Source: Cornell Coop. Extension

Cucumber/squash leaves wilt suddenly

Squash bug or vine borer

Hand-pick bugs. Cut and destroy infested stems. Cover seedlings with row cover until flowering.

Source: UMass Extension

How to use this guide: Match the symptom you see. Confirm with the cited extension source. For escalating problems, your state cooperative extension service offers low-cost diagnostic lab work — search "[your state] cooperative extension plant disease diagnostic lab."

For full guides on every diagnosis above, visit outdoorplantcare.com. Every claim on the site cites a primary horticultural source. No sponsored content. No AI-generated articles.