

Roses - Organic Pest & Disease Management

A Garden Guide

Roses can live for many years, but even under the best care, may occasionally have health issues due to disease or pests. Poor drainage, lack of water, not enough nutrients, or other environmental issues may weaken your plants and leave them vulnerable to attack.



Roses may be impacted by environmental conditions or living pathogens. If the damage is uniform across the entire plant, the issue is usually environmental or cultural. If the visible damage is non-uniform, it is usually caused by living pathogens.

A Healthy Start

The best way to ensure a good start is to start with a healthy, vigorous plant. Use well draining soil and plenty of rich composted organic material. Soaking the roots for a few hours while you dig and prepare the hole will be helpful. Be sure to provide 6+ hours of full sunlight, and adequate air circulation. Air needs to flow readily between plants to promote rapidly drying leaves. Clean up all debris around plants. Water early in the morning, and avoid getting foliage wet. Water the roots - not the leaves.

Common Pest Problems

Symptoms: Masses of tiny insects on the fresh new growth - buds and leaves

Cause: **Aphids** - green, red, or black soft bugs about 1/8" long, found in ravenous clusters on new growth. Aphids appear in spring and can persist into summer.

Remedy: Hose off plants. If that does not work, suffocate them with applications of horticultural oil or neem oil. Do not apply oils during daytime, and follow label instructions. Oils must be applied in the early morning or late afternoon.

Symptoms: Buds are distorted, bloom tips discolored

Cause: **Thrips** - light brown insects, very slender, about 1/8" long. Can appear inside petals, and spread rapidly.

Remedy: When buds are pea-sized, use horticultural oil or neem oil. Do not apply oils during daytime, and follow label instructions.

Symptoms: Leaves are stuck together, unopened buds have holes

Cause: **Omnivorous leafroller** - a moth larvae that makes a cocoon-like structure with leaves.

Remedy: Remove the cocoon-like structures. Use horticultural oil or neem oil. Do not apply oils during daytime, and follow label instructions.

Symptoms: Leaves may be full of tiny pinprick dots, or yellow leaf surface. Undersides of leaves may have tiny red specks, webbing, or spider-like insects may be seen.

Cause: **Spider mite** (red spider or 2-spotted mite) may or may not be visible to the naked eye. Spider mites love hot weather.

Remedy: High pressure hose water, horticultural oil, or neem oil. Be sure to thoroughly cover the undersides of the leaves. Keep plants well watered during hot weather.

Symptoms: Leaves have been chewed down, leaving just the bare skeleton of a leaf. Unopened flower buds are chewed and even open buds are damaged.

Cause: **Beetles** - usually the notorious **Japanese beetle** - with metallic green and brown head. Caterpillars can also cause similar symptoms.

Remedy: Handpick visible beetles, set up scent traps far from your roses, use Milky Spore to break up their lifecycle. Milky spore powder is best applied in the fall.

Common Diseases

Symptoms: Dark black spots with irregular edges, found on leaves. The spots will be mostly round, in varying sizes (needlepoint to quarter-sized). Leaves will yellow or start to fall from the plant.

Cause: **Fungal - Black spot**. Black spot shows up when there's rainy weather, poor air circulation, or improper watering technique.

Remedy: After winter pruning, apply a dormant lime-sulphur spray. Remove all dropped foliage to stop disease transmission cycle. Spray undersides of leaves, alternating with neem oil and sulfur.

Symptoms: Dark irregular splotches on foliage. Healthy-looking leaves drop off.

Cause: **Fungal - Downy Mildew**. Appears when nights are cool and humid, can develop rapidly.

Remedy: Water plants early in the day. Avoid getting foliage wet. Prune off the defoliated parts of the plant. Clean up all dropped plant debris, apply sulfur. Can also use neem oil or copper.

Symptoms: White powdery substance appears, especially on new growth.

Cause: **Fungal - Powdery Mildew**. Appears during warm days and cool nights.

Remedy: Try spraying impacted areas with dish soap and baking soda. Make sure plants have excellent air circulation and full sunlight. If necessary, can step up to alternating neem oil or copper.

Not common Yet, But Something To Be aware Of:

Symptoms: Fresh new growth is bright red but never turns green, super thick stems with excessive thorns, flower buds are in tiny tight clusters, any part of the plant looks stunted, deformed, and just not quite like how a rose is supposed to look.

Potential Cause: **Viral - Rose Rosette Disease**. This is a virus spread by a mite. The mite enjoys living on wild, invasive Multiflora Rose / *Rosa multiflora*.

Remedy: Take photographs and send them to your County Cooperative Extension Service. Once infected, there is no treatment available to homeowners. If Rose Rosette Disease is confirmed, remove the entire plant, including roots, bag it up and put in garbage. Do not try to compost it. Do not plant roses in that location again. The only avenue currently known is preventative: prune in winter, remove all nearby Multiflora Rose, avoid using leaf blowers near your roses (the tiny mites easily spread by wind).

Common Horticultural Problem:

Symptom: Thin canes growing from below the graft union.

Possible Cause: **Sucker growth** from the rootstock.

Remedy: Remove suckers to divert growing energy back to above the graft. If you're not 100% certain if the growth is below the graft, allow the growth to continue, until a more confident identification can be made. Suckers will grow very fast, very thin, and if they bloom, the blooms will be different.

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