

Soil mold in houseplants



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Question: When I was watering my houseplants this morning, I noticed a white substance on the soil on one of them. It looks like a mold. Is this harmful to me or the plant?

Answer: It sounds like you have some kind of saprophytic fungus growing in one of your pots and there is no need to panic! All soil contains many kinds of organisms, some beneficial and some not so much. This type of mold growth on plant soil is usually not particularly damaging to people unless someone has an extreme mold allergy.

It is a good idea to analyze what is happening in that container environment to cause those fungi to appear.

A lot of times, you will observe a thread-like growth across the soil surface. The threads are the mycelium, the root-like structure of the fungus. The most common reasons this fungus starts to grow are problems with potting soil, watering practices, drainage, lighting or air circulation.

First, is the plant looking healthy? Feel down into the soil and notice if it is soggy. Poor watering practices are the main cause of fungal growth. One good way to water your houseplants (and avoid a wet soil surface and/or fungal gnats) is to do your watering bottom-up.

Place each pot in a bowl and let the plant draw up the water through the drainage holes. Do not leave the bowl under the plant for more than a few hours as you don't want the plant to sit in water.

You will figure out how long it takes for your plant to get enough water using this



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JANET BITTER

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method — the pot should feel somewhat heavy and when you put your finger down into the soil you should feel moisture a couple of inches from the surface.

There is no hard rule on how often to water — it all depends on the type of plant and the environment it is in. Always make sure there are adequate drainage holes in the pot. If necessary, you can set a functional container with drainage into a decorative outer container.

Good air circulation is necessary for most plants. Make sure your containers are not crowded together and your plants receive some air movement.

Insufficient light can also aggravate fungal growth. Usually if this is a problem,

the overall appearance of your plant is not good — it may be leggy or light in color.

Always remove dead leaves from the surface of your pot.

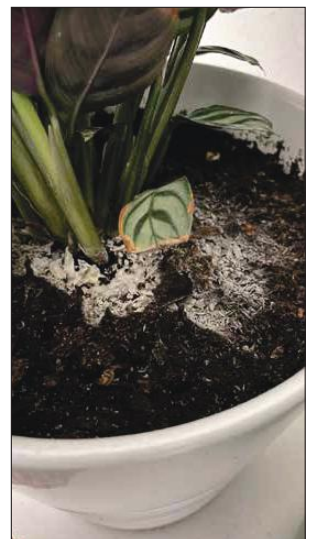
So, what do you do now that you have this fungus on your plant? Do you need to repot your plant? It is not necessary, but if it's due anyway, this might be the time to do it. If not, you can scrape off the top of the soil and replenish with fresh soil. However, if the conditions which caused the mold to grow are not addressed, you will soon have more mold on the surface.

Some people have reported success with a light sprinkling of cinnamon on the surface of the soil. Cinnamon contains a substance with some fungicidal properties. Another household remedy is baking soda (sodium

bicarbonate), but too much of this will leave high levels of sodium in the soil and this could harm your plant.

It is natural for soils to contain fungal organisms. However, the growth of fungus on the surface of your soil may indicate you need to change part of your cultural practices. The best way to rid your plants of this problem is to prevent it in the first place.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.



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