

# Sooty mold caused by sap-sucking bugs

**Q**uestion: I have several camellia shrubs and they have lots of blooms this year, but a lot of the leaves are black. They look dirty and are sticky, and some leaves have spots and are turning yellow. Can you tell me what is causing this and how to treat it?

**A**nswer: The camellia, an evergreen shrub native to eastern and southern Asia, is a favorite of many gardeners. It is fairly easy to grow and provides lots of bold blossoms, which come in a wide variety of colors and sizes – in fact, there are over 3,000 named varieties. However, as with many plants, they can be the target of garden pests. From the description you have provided it sounds like your shrubs have sooty mold, a common problem in the Pacific Northwest. Although it doesn't look very good, it is generally harmless.

Sooty molds are dark fungi that grow on plant surfaces that have been covered by insect honeydew, which is left behind by insects feeding on the plants. Insects that cause this include scale, aphids, mealy bugs, white flies and psyllids. Most of these insects you can spot easily, but not scale. An



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infestation of scale is indicated by a white cottony substance on the underside of the leaves. All of these insects suck plant juices from the camellia's foliage and the soft new spring growth and excrete a sweet, sticky substance – the honeydew – back onto the surface of the plant. This substance serves as the incubator for sooty mold and attracts ants.

Ants actually add to the problem of sooty mold by collecting and tending honeydew secreting insects. Ants will stroke the bodies of the insects to milk them of the honeydew, which they then take back to their nests to be used as food.

In plants that have a heavy infestation of sooty mold, the mold will block out sunlight and thus interfere with photosynthesis – the process in green plants of converting carbon dioxide and water into food using energy from sunlight. In this case you will see yellowing of the leaves and premature leaf drop. Most healthy camellias



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**Sooty mold, if it gets bad enough, can block the plant from receiving sunlight and interfere with photosynthesis.**

can tolerate some sooty mold and recover just fine on their own. But, the look of the mold is ugly. Here are things you can do to treat the pest problem and remove the mold:

- A strong spray of water from a garden hose will dislodge aphids, soft scale and other sap-sucking insects, plus many eggs. Spray early in the morning when they are less active; repeating every two to three days.

- Manually wipe the stubborn deposits off with a soft damp cloth.

- Place sticky traps and sticky tape around the plant to keep insects from returning and keep ants off the plants.

- Prune away heavily infested areas.

- Eliminate weeds, which can attract insects, from around the plants.

- If heavier treatment is needed, spray with insecticidal soaps, horticulture oils or neem oil. Sprayed on the underside

of the leaves, this will kill adult scale and smother the eggs.

Once the honeydew producing insects are gone the sooty mold will stop spreading and will eventually be washed off by rain.

To prevent it in the future, you want to keep your camellias healthy with proper water and fertilizer. Don't over water or overfertilize; too much fertilizer causes growth spurts, which attract hungry

sap-sucking insects.

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*Do you have a gardening question? Please e-mail, call, or visit the Douglas County Master Gardeners Plant Clinic at [douglasmg@oregonstate.edu](mailto:douglasmg@oregonstate.edu), 541-236-3052, or 1134 S.E. Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.*