

Lichens may mean something is lacking

Do you have trees or shrubs in poor health with their trunks and branches covered with gray-green crusty growths? These growths are lichens. They are harmless and do not cause the poor growth or decline of plants.

Lichen is an alga and a fungus growing together in a symbiotic relationship. The alga supplies the fungus with carbohydrates through photosynthesis and the fungus protects the alga from drying. Lichens are not pathogens nor are they parasitic to the plants on which they are found. They simply need something to structurally support them.

As a tree or shrub declines in health, the canopy thins allowing more light to penetrate the plant. The additional light and the plant's slow growth allow lichens a better environment to grow.

When lichen growth is abundant on dying limbs and branches, ask the question, "Why is the plant growing poorly?" Diagnosing the problem may be difficult, requiring considerable knowledge of plants.

The reasons for a plant's poor health are numerous. It simply may be a case of the wrong plant in the wrong place or poor growing conditions. It may be due to injuries from mowing equipment, misplaced lawn chemicals, etc. Trees and shrubs that are planted too deep will usually be in a state of poor health. The plant may be declining from lack of fertilizer or because the pH is incorrect. Or, it may be due to the natural decline of an older plant. Correctly identifying and correcting the cause(s) for poor growth will allow the plant's health to improve and the lichens will gradually disappear.

To gain insight into possible causes for lichens growing on your trees and shrubs, you may want to bring a sample of the plant in question to our next plant clinic.

The plant clinic will be held Wednesday, August 26 from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. in Fort Walton Beach at the Okaloosa County Extension building, 127 W. Hollywood Blvd.

The plant clinic is not a lecture. It is designed to provide a place and time for people to bring in samples of plants for diagnosis including weeds for identification.

If you have a plant problem that you would like diagnosed, bring a sample of the weed, plant, insect, etc., to the clinic. Be sure to bring a fresh sample that represents what is seen in the landscape. This may include a plant stem with several leaves, a 4-inch square of grass with roots attached, etc. You may also bring a sample of your soil for pH testing.

For instructions on collecting the soil sample, call the Okaloosa County Extension Office at 689-5850 or 729-1400 extension 5850.

Larry Williams, UF/IFAS Extension Agent, Okaloosa County, August 19, 2009