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Common Houseplant Problems

By John Hartman

The following information may help to determine causes for common houseplant symptoms. Symptoms are listed and followed by possible causes.

Brown leaf tips, burned leaf margins:

Root injury from overwatering; drought, or excess fertilizer; excessive exposure to cold temperatures; low humidity; pesticide injury or chemical damage; potassium deficiency; root rot disease; or nutrient toxicity (e.g., fluoride toxicity).

Pale foliage or yellowing of older leaves:

Air pollution, gas fumes; insect attack; insufficient fertility, especially nitrogen; or poor root health due to poor drainage, poor aeration, or pot-bound roots.

Pale foliage or yellowing of new growth:

Improper soil pH; or trace element imbalance.

General yellowing:

Too much light; insufficient fertilizer; high temperatures; root rot disease; insect attack; or overwatering.

Small, pale leaves, spindly growth:

Too little light; poor soil fertility; overwatering; or poorly drained soil.

Sudden defoliation:

Change in location and/or sudden change in light, temperature or humidity; overwatering; or transplant shock.

Brown, yellow, or black spots on leaves:

Fungal or bacterial leaf spot disease; overwatering; sunburn occurring when plant placed outside; or chemical spray injury.

Wilting or drooping of foliage, plants do not recover with watering:

Poor root health due to overwatering; drought; too much fertilizer; compacted soil; or root, stem, or crown rot disease.

Crown or stem is soft and mushy:

Crown or stem rot disease, coupled with overwatering.

Roots brown, soft, or rotted:

Poor root health from overwatering, drought, excess fertilizer, or root rot disease.