

MESSENGER-INQUIRER



September 13, 2025

Reduce Insect and Plant Diseases by Cleaning Up the Garden

By Annette Meyer Heisdorffer, Ph.D.

Extension Agent for Horticulture Education – Daviess County

Before the weather turns cold, take the time to work in the garden to reduce insect pests and manage diseases for next year. This is accomplished by using a few cultural practices.

Insect pests may be found in dead leaves in and around the garden. Pests such as squash vine borer, Mexican bean beetle, squash bug, diamondback moth, tomato hornworm, cabbage looper, and imported cabbageworm, are a few examples of insects able to overwinter in the garden. Getting rid of the dead tomato, bean, squash, and cabbage plants along with other plant material lessens the chance that these pests will overwinter in the garden. These insects often make their home in dead leaves and plant material, which offers them some protection from the elements. Removing the plants from the area of the vegetable garden or tilling them into the soil destroys their hiding places.

Many diseases overwinter on the same plants they infected during the summer. For example, apple scab, a common fungal disease which infects apples and crab apples, spends the winter in dead infected leaves on the ground. The warm, moist weather of spring triggers the fungus to grow and release spores that infect new growth on the tree. Raking up dead leaves

MESSENGER-INQUIRER

from under these trees in the fall is one way to reduce the severity of disease next spring. The disease may not be completely controlled by this method because of the weather, but good sanitation practices are an important part of any disease control strategy.

Get rid of rotting fruit, especially fruit that is hanging on the tree. Even though this fruit seems dry and lifeless, it is likely to harbor many diseases. This is also true for grapes. During the pruning process in late winter, remove fruit that is still on the vine, which may serve as a source of disease.

Practicing good sanitation in the vegetable garden for disease control is important too. Plant tissues can harbor diseases over the winter. Remove dead vegetable plants and other plant material. If the material is destroyed, then it will not be an immediate source of disease for the next year and slows down the development of common plant diseases.

Excessive weed growth during late fall and winter also contributes to pest problems. Weeds provide food and shelter for many overwintering insects and serve as sites for egg laying in the fall. Flea beetles, which are pests on young vegetables, especially sweet corn and eggplant, find food and shelter in crop residues and weeds throughout the winter.

The two-spotted spider mites continue to feed on weeds after the vegetable crops have withered. If the weeds are not removed or mowed down, the spider mites will be ready to infest your vegetables next spring.

In the landscape, twig girdlers cause small branches of hickory, pecan, and persimmon to fall out of the tree. The female beetle selects a twig about the diameter of a fat pencil and chews deep, narrow grooves that leave about a two-foot-long section attached by only a slender piece of heartwood. The brown beetles crawl along the terminal portion and make small notches in

MESSENGER-INQUIRER

which 5 to 20 eggs are placed. The girdled twigs, which contain eggs and white legless larvae, break and fall to the ground. Twig pruning produces growth deformities that affect the shape and appearance of small trees.

To manage the twig girdlers, collect and destroy the fallen twigs. This is the most effective means for reducing the potential infestation for next year. Application of insecticides to control these insects has not been very satisfactory.

Another common landscape pest is the bagworm. The small, 1.5- to 2-inch long, brown bags hanging in evergreen trees and shrubs are full of several hundred eggs. The eggs will hatch in May. By removing the bags now, the population will be reduced. The easiest way to remove the bag is with hand pruners or heavy scissors, otherwise the needles or scales of the evergreen may be stripped off the branch as the bag is pulled. If there are too many to remove by hand, watch for the eggs to hatch in mid-May to June. The small larvae are easier to manage with insecticide at that time.

Fall and winter are excellent seasons to inspect plants for scale insects. These insects usually have a hard outer covering like a shell and are found where branches join the trunk or near buds. Scale insects may also be seen this time of year on the leaves of broadleaf evergreens such as holly or euonymus. Treatments with dormant or horticultural oils are usually effective against scale. Follow label directions when applying insecticides.

For more information about cleaning up the garden, contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service at 270-685-8480 or annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu.

Annette's Tip:

MESSENGER-INQUIRER

Leave hummingbird feeders out because the stragglers migrating south need food along the way. Leaving the feeder out does not keep them from migrating. Hopefully most will move on as cooler weather arrives.

Upcoming Events:

Native Alternatives to Invasive Plants in the Landscape is scheduled for September 17, 2025, at 10:00 a.m. at the Western Kentucky Botanical Garden. We will discuss native alternatives to invasive plants.

The Owensboro Regional Farmers Market is still open on Saturdays from 8:00 a.m. to noon through October and on Tuesday mornings through September at 1205 Triplett St. The Holiday Market will be held on November 1 from 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.

This institution is an Equal Opportunity Provider.