

## **THE PLANT DOCTOR WILL SEE YOU NOW**

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By Ralph E. Mitchell, *Director/Horticulture Agent of Charlotte County Extension Service*

So you have a sick plant and wonder where there is a "Plant Doctor" and you don't want to wait until the "patient" is critical. Charlotte County Extension is home to the "Plant Doctors", or as we call them, the Master Gardener Volunteers, whom offer many helpful services to the gardener including plant disease diagnosis. Many of the samples submitted to our office turn out in fact to be plant diseases. However, in order to make a decent diagnosis, these volunteers respectfully request that the sample submitted is properly collected and cared for before delivery to our office or a Plant Clinic site.

First, make sure to provide a good amount of sample with a range of symptoms showing. Specifically, samples with healthy tissue bordering some that is actively infected, are good candidates for submission. If the sample is wet, don't add any additional moisture. Keep the sample refrigerated until you are ready to bring it into our office. Do not let good samples go bad in a hot car! Try to shake off most of the soil from roots of plants. Also, please be kind to our diagnosticians - place ample written warning on the sample package if there are thorns or spines - ouch!

Information is also important including when the disease began, fertilizers used, sun or shade location, watering practices, etc. Many diseased plants submitted for examination may be categorized as spots and blights of leaves and flowers. When collecting samples from this category, collect at least twelve items. Make sure that the leaves show a wide range of disease stages. Arrange these leaves and press in between cardboard or paper. This will keep the plant tissue in good order until it can be examined. Note the symptoms and colors when freshly collected.

Diebacks are another subject of collection specifics to highlight. Submit pruned samples that include diseased and healthy tissue. Also collect root samples in case the dieback is associated with root problems. Turf samples are also commonly brought in our office. As with many samples, collect turf from the zone of transition - the area that has both diseased and healthy tissue. Obtain at least an eight to twelve-inch square plug of sod for submission. While you should make sure that you include a good portion of roots, shake off excessive soil.

These days, a digital photo is worth a thousand words! By taking and sending a digital picture to our office, we have the power of the Distance Diagnostic and Identification System or DDIS to get this information to a number of specialists across the state for examination with a fairly quick turnaround time. Four pictures of various angles and views are usually recommended. Now while images are only one aspect of a diagnosis, it gets the conversation going that may bring up more questions, a tentative diagnosis or trigger the need for submission of an actual specimen. With the use of a digital camera and a special microscope, our office can also take more refined pictures for submission. If you have a photo or two to send, email them to me at [ralph.mitchell@charlottefl.com](mailto:ralph.mitchell@charlottefl.com).

In some cases an entire plant must be submitted for examination. Symptoms such as wilting, yellowing, leaf drop and general decline may indicate a root disease. In this case, keep the roots and some soil intact.

Master Gardener volunteers man the Plant Lifeline at our office from 1:00pm until

4:00pm Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and at various Plant Clinic sites around the County as noted below. If a plant disease cannot be determined locally, we can arrange to have it sent to a UF lab for examination.

If you think that your plant is sick, please consider bringing it (or part of it) into our Master Gardeners for a diagnosis and hopefully a good prognosis!

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For more information on all types of plant disease issues, please contact our Master Gardeners on the Plant Lifeline at 941.764.4340 from 1:00pm-4:00pm Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Our office is located at 25550 Harbor View Road, Suite 3, in Port Charlotte. Our **Plant Clinics** are available across the county:

- **Demonstration Garden (6900 Florida Street, PG)** Thursdays 9:00am-11:00am.
- **Englewood/Charlotte Public Library** Thursdays 10:00am-1:00pm.
- **Mid-County Regional Library** 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Thursday of month 1:00pm-3:00pm.
- **Edison College Learning Resources Library** 3<sup>rd</sup> Tuesday of month 1:00pm-4:00pm.
- **South Gulf Cove Learning Garden** 3<sup>rd</sup> Wednesday of month 9:00am-12:00pm.

Monthly **Plant Clinics** are Saturdays 9:00am-12:00pm at the following locations:

- **Peachland Promenades Publix** 2<sup>nd</sup> Saturday of month.
- **Home Depot Murdock & Home Depot Punta Gorda** 3<sup>rd</sup> Saturday of month.
- **Lowes Garden Center Murdock** 4<sup>th</sup> Saturday of month.

Ralph Mitchell is the County Extension Director/Horticulture Agent for the Charlotte County Cooperative Extension Service. You may contact him by email ([Ralph.Mitchell@charlottefl.com](mailto:Ralph.Mitchell@charlottefl.com)). You may also contact a volunteer Master Gardener 1:00pm-4:00pm Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 941.764.4340 or by email ([Master.Gardener@charlottefl.com](mailto:Master.Gardener@charlottefl.com)).

For more information about our Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program, please contact our FYN Horticulture Program Assistant, Allison Steele, at 941.764.4340. Allison can help educate you about the Florida Yards & Neighborhoods Program so that you can create a beautiful, Florida-Friendly landscape that saves you time and money while conserving precious water resources and reducing pollution.

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*Resource:*

*Simone, G.W. & Cullen, R.E. (1999) Florida Extension Plant Disease Clinic: Sample Submission and Diagnosis, UF/IFAS Extension Service.*

*Momol, T., Kucharek, & Dankers, H. (2001) Guidelines for Submitting Plant Disease Samples Using the Distance Diagnostic and Identification System (DDIS). UF/IFAS Extension Service.*