Lichen and Slime Mold Are Harmless

When the weather brings frequent rain showers and the environment stays damp, the perfect conditions form for the development of light green, crusty material on the bark of trees and light brown blobs in the mulch. It may seem like an invasion or terrible disease. However, the crusty material on tree branches and trunks, called lichens, is easier to see during wet conditions. The tan colored blobs, which may form on plants and mulch, is caused by slime mold. Fortunately, both are harmless.

Most commonly, lichens appear as a perennial green or gray coating on the trunks and branches of trees and shrubs. They are actually two organisms in one, composed of a fungal body harboring green or blue-green algae, which live together in complete harmony. In the symbiotic relationship, the algae, through photosynthesis, supply carbohydrate food to the fungus and in turn, receive protection and trapped water and mineral elements from the fungus.

In this relationship, the algae and the fungus are only distinguishable through a microscope, and the lichen persists longer than the algae or the fungus would separately.

Lichen color may include forms that are green, blue-green, yellow-green, brown, gray, or even red. They take on various forms on trees and shrubs. Some are closely appressed to the bark surface and are described as crustose. Lichens which are foliose have leaf-like lobes that
extend out from the bark surface. Others have hair-like or strap-like forms and are referred to as fruticose lichens.

Lichens do not parasitize trees, but merely use the bark as a place on which to grow. In fact, lichens can be seen growing on rocks, weathered lumber, or on dead branches that have fallen from the tree. Some may consider lichens unsightly, but they are not generally injurious except that when extensive, they may interfere with the gaseous exchange of the parts they cover. Because of their extreme sensitivity to sulfur dioxide air pollution, lichens seldom appear on trees in industrial cities.

Lichens rarely develop on rapidly growing trees because new bark is constantly being formed before the lichens have an opportunity to grow over much of the surface. Therefore, lichens on certain species may indicate poor tree growth. In some plantings, the more vigorous trees have fewer lichens than those of the same age nearby in a state of decline. However, few studies have been conducted to verify any correlation between lichen growth and tree vigor. Lichens proliferate when more light is provided, which could explain why they are more frequently seen on dead, leafless branches. In addition, increases in lichens are sometimes associated with moist climate.

Slime molds are amoeba-like organisms which feed on bacteria and yeasts in the soil. It looks like a dog was sick in the stomach. The molds quickly appear as 4- to 6-inch patches of white, cream, gray, or purple with a crusty surface. Some become a foot or more in size.

During cloudy, humid weather these molds grow out of the soil and creep onto whatever is available. They use the plants and mulch as support structures from which spores are spread by the wind, water, mowers, other equipment, or movement by people or animals. Turfgrass,
weeds, strawberries, bedding plants, and ground covers, as well as mulches, sidewalks, and driveways may become covered with masses of gray, yellowish, or black dusty spores.

While slime molds frequently cause considerable concern among homeowners, these fungi do not feed on plant tissue. Slime molds merely use low lying vegetation and other objects as support during their reproductive stage. When the fungal growth is heavy, the shaded plant parts turn yellow. Controls are generally not necessary since slime molds do little harm and usually disappear with the onset of dry weather. When slime mold infestations are heavy, spore masses may be broken up with a rake or a broom. Hosing with a strong stream of water is also effective but should only be done after the onset of dry weather when the threat of further development is past.

Washing off slime molds during prolonged wet weather will only help to spread the organism to previously unaffected areas. Slime molds which form thick layers or masses can be removed by hand or by removing the affected plant part.

Remember that lichens and slime mold are not harmful. For more information, contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service at 270-685-8480.

Annette’s tip:

According to Dr. Lee Townsend, University of Kentucky Extension Entomologist, a study from Delaware investigating the use of bug zappers placed around homes near potential mosquito breeding sites during June and July were shown to be of little benefit in reducing the number of biting flies which include mosquitoes. Only 0.2 percent of the over 13,000 insects counted from the electric grids were biting flies including mosquitoes, while 13 percent were beneficial insects. The UV lamps with additional visible light are less attractive to biting flies.
Many species of mosquitoes are not attracted by black lights. For insect species that do respond to UV, only a portion will actually make it to the charged grids.

**Ongoing Event:**

The Extension Master Gardener Hotline is open from 9:00 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays during the growing season. Calls and visitors are welcome anytime, but the Hotline produces another way for answering your questions about gardening and your landscape. Call 270-685-8480 or come to the Extension office at 4800A New Hartford Road where a trained volunteer will assist you.

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