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Lichens and Slime Mold Abundant during Wet Weather
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What are these light green splotches on the tree branches and trunk? Will it kill my tree?
What is that brown blob on the mulch? Did a dog vomit? What is going on?

With available moisture in the environment due to frequent rain showers, the perfect conditions exist to encourage the development of green, crusty material on the bark of trees and light brown blobs in the mulch. During wet conditions, the green, crusty material on tree branches and trunks, called lichens, is easier to see. The tan colored blobs, which may form on plants and mulch, are caused by slime mold and not a dog. While it may seem like these cause destruction and disease of trees and other plants, thankfully, both are harmless.

Usually, lichens appear as a perennial green or gray coating on the trunks and branches of trees and shrubs. Lichens are two organisms in one. They are composed of a fungal body and 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, trapped water, and mineral elements from the fungus.

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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 damage trees or shrubs. They use the bark as a place to grow on. In fact, lichens are found 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.

Lichens rarely develop on rapidly growing trees because new bark is constantly 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.

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Slime molds are amoeba-like organisms that feed on bacteria and yeasts in the soil. They look 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 only helps 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. The publication titled, "Mulch Mushrooms, Slime Molds and Other Saprophytes" can be found at

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<https://plantpathology.ca.uky.edu/files/ppfs-gen-06.pdf>. “Lichens in Landscape Plantings” is found at <https://plantpathology.ca.uky.edu/files/ppfs-gen-06.pdf>.

For more information, contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service at 270-685-8480 or anntte.heisdorffer@uky.edu.

Annette’s tip:

Help to manage mosquitoes by removing empty containers and plastic sheeting. Turn over wheelbarrows and small pools when not in use. Empty water catchment saucers under pots. Clean clogged gutters to prevent standing water. Check all faucets, air conditioner units, and condensation drains for water puddles that remain for several days. Eliminate any puddles that form. In addition, watch for and repair any leaks. Change the water in bird baths often.

Upcoming event:

Owensboro Regional Farmers’ Market at 1205 Triplett St., Owensboro begins opening on Tuesday mornings at 8:00 a.m. to noon or sell out and Thursday evenings at 4:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. from June through August. These hours are in addition to Saturday mornings from 8:00 a.m. to noon. Vegetables, fruit, cut flowers, plants, baked goods, local crafts, and more are available to purchase at the market.

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