

Sooty Mold

Description

Sooty mold is a charcoal black fungus that appears as a black coating (**Fig. 1 & Fig. 2**) on the surface of leaves, fruits, twigs, and branches of many deciduous and evergreen shrubs and trees. This fungus is not pathogenic to plants but obtains its nourishment from insect honeydew. Honeydew is a sweet, clear, sticky substance secreted by insects such as aphids, mealybugs, scales and whiteflies. The honeydew drops from the insects to the leaves and twigs. Wind-blown sooty mold spores (seeds) that stick to the honeydew then have a suitable medium for growth. When spores germinate, they send out black fungus strands (mycelial threads) that bring about discoloration. A heavy coat of black mold may build up on twigs over more than one growing season.

Injury

On leaves this coat of mold screens out light and reduces the plant's capacity to produce food. On some trees, no obvious damage can be noticed. Shrubs under trees that are heavily infested with honeydew-producing insects may be seriously damaged or killed because the leaf chlorophyll cannot function properly. azalea, rhododendron, *Pieris*, *Cotoneaster*, holly and other low-growing shrubs, growing under shady conditions are susceptible to serious damage.

Management

To prevent sooty mold, control the insects. The insects involved are small and may be present in large numbers before the black strands of sooty mold appear. Trees and shrubs should be observed frequently during the growing season for honeydew and insects. At the first sign of aphids, mealybugs, whiteflies, or other insects, an insecticide may need to be used. Contact Cornell Cooperative Extension - Suffolk County first for information on how to have [insect pests identified](#) and to determine which insect management techniques should be employed to control the infestation.



Fig. 1. Sooty mold on the twig and needles of a white pine (Photo by Thomas Kowalsick)



Fig. 2. Close-up photograph of the sooty mold fungus on white pine needles (Photograph by Thomas Kowalsick)

Remember—look for insects not only on the affected plants, but on over-story plants as well for infestation when sooty mold appears.

Sooty mold can be washed off plants, but unless the causal insects are controlled, it will reappear.

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