

Indian River County
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Florida Extension Plant Disease Clinic

By: Janet Bargar, Water Quality Agent

Have you ever had brown spots all over a plant that won't go away no matter how many times you treat it with a pesticide? If you answered yes, either the spots are supposed to be there or you're using the wrong pesticide. Many times we misdiagnose a plant problem, which leads to wasted time, money, and chemicals. To help us figure out what is going on with our plants and lower frustration levels, there's the Florida Extension Plant Disease Clinic (FEPDC).

This fee-based service is provided by the University of Florida and determines from submitted plant samples if symptoms are due to a fungus, bacterium, or virus. In order to receive an accurate diagnosis, it is important to send the best sample possible such as plant parts that are at the early stages of the disease. If you aren't able to catch the problem quickly, send plant samples that have parts that are still partially alive and show the problem. Samples that are completely brown and dry or have turned to mush will not help clinic staff figure out the cause of the problem. Also, send multiple parts of the plant that have the symptoms. For example, if you notice a disease on the leaves, include the entire stem with multiple leaves on it. You should also send numerous pieces because some analysis techniques may require a lot of plant parts. If too few parts are available, an accurate diagnosis will be difficult.

In order to get correct and timely service, samples must come from within Florida with a Plant Disease Diagnostic Form, which is available from your local county extension service or online at <http://plantpath.ifas.ufl.edu/pdc/Publications/form2901.pdf>. The form needs to be completely filled out and kept separate from the plant parts. Finally, include the fee with the sample. All of this can be either mailed or delivered in person to the clinic.

When collecting and packaging the samples, here are some guidelines that will help your sample arrive at the clinic in good condition.

- Take samples before applying pesticides.
- Don't package the sample if it is wet and don't add moisture.
- Keep samples refrigerated to prevent them from drying out until you get them in the mail.
- Separate sample parts in the submission bag. For example, keep roots separate from leaves.
- If the sample contains thorns or spines, mark the package with "Warning."
- Seal the sample in a plastic bag if mailing time to reach the FEPDC will take two days or less. Any longer than that, the sample should be packed tightly in a box with dry paper.
- Mail samples early in the week so they don't sit at the post office over the weekend.
- If samples aren't submitted correctly, clinic staff reserves the right to discard them.

- There are specific sample submission guidelines for certain plant problems: cankers and galls, diebacks, fruit diseases, spots and blights of leaves and flowers, mushroom identification, systemic symptoms, turf, and virus identification. Contact your local county extension service to learn about these guidelines.

Once the sample arrives at the clinic, it is processed on a first come first served basis, but some diagnostic methods may take longer than others. Once the disease has been identified, a form describing the disease and control options is sent to you. A copy of the form is also sent to your local extension service to make them familiar with your problem if you have any questions and to keep agents up to date about plant diseases in your county.

The FEPDC is a wonderful service provided to Florida residents to figure out what is going on with our plants in order to keep them healthy and our frustration low. If you have any questions about the clinic, please contact your local county extension service.

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