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Control Freak: A Gardener's Dilemma

How much disease is too much disease? Will a broken branch take the whole tree out? Would it be better to scorch the earth or pluck all of your weeds by hand? Sometimes, perspective matters.

In the garden, there can be many factors working against you, from environmental stressors to diseases and pests to heavy clay soil. Knowing how to deal with these issues is important, but so is knowing how to work around them. Powdery mildew is a great example. This category of fungal disease can affect many different kinds of plants and usually appears in the summer and fall in warm weather, with humidity, or in tightly packed garden beds. Some people might reach for the fungicide first, but what if you don't have a fungicide?

The first step in dealing with a problem in the garden is knowing what you're up against. Powdery mildew is bound to show up every year when it gets hot. If you planted a variety of shrubs or vegetables that you know are susceptible to pests, then those should be on your radar. The next step, before you take any control, is to assess how important that plant is. An apple tree infested with borers is of more immediate concern than peonies with powdery mildew in September. This step will also include knowing what you or the plant can tolerate. For example, with powdery mildew and rust, some issues are mostly cosmetic. Of course, rust covered trees will lose a lot of photosynthetic ability and bear less fruit, so there is a threshold for plant health.

The final step, and the most obvious one, is dealing with your problems. This can come in many forms, from cultural to chemical to mechanical. Cultural controls include selecting resistant varieties, watering, fertilizing, spacing or pruning, and, overall, promoting healthy plants. Mechanical control is hands-on; this is where weeding, hoeing, and pruning out infected material happen. Chemical control is the 'nuclear option' for gardens and benefits from prior research on the gardener's end.

Fungicides for foliar diseases are usually preventative and require favorable weather and timing. This means that spraying for those rusts or powdery mildew needs to happen before you start seeing fungus. The control step is also where you need to evaluate if long-term control is worth it or if you should cut your losses. Trunk injections for Dutch Elm Disease might be considered for a strongly sentimental tree or one that is perfect for your landscape. However, an elm that is susceptible and at risk can be cut down and replaced with a resistant variety or another species. The most impactful chemical control gardeners may use is glyphosate herbicides. Herbicide can

be a powerful tool but can also damage more than just weeds. Spray when it isn't boilingly hot or exceptionally windy, and keep the spray on the plants you intended.

However you plan your garden, know that control can come in many forms. An integrated pest management plan can include several options, but remember to use what works for you. Know your needs and know your limits, then execute a strategy. If all else fails, plant again!

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