Confessions of a Black Thumb:
Plants That I Have Killed
(Or at Least Seriously Maimed)

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• Victims
  – Hostas
  – Many a potted plant

• Causes of the problem
  – Unwillingness to water
  – Cluelessness that plants really DO need water

• Lessons learned
  – Water adequately
    • ~1 inch of water per week for established plants
    • ~1.5 to 2 inches of water per week for new transplants
  – Mulch properly
    • ~1 to 2 inches for heavier (clay) soils
    • ~3 to 4 inches for lighter (sandy) soils

• Other considerations
  – Water correctly
    • Use a drip or soaker hose
    • DO NOT use a sprinkler
  – Water at the correct time
    • Water when it is cool (late evening/early morning)
    • DO NOT water when it is hot (mid-day)

• Victim: Dappled willow
• Causes of the problem
  – Pure unadulterated stupidity
  – Inability to admit I can’t remember everything
  – Inability to set a timer
Confessions of a Black Thumb
Overwatering

- Lessons learned
  - Buy AND USE a timer!
  - DO NOT overwater
    - ~1 inch of water per week for established plants
    - ~1.5 to 2 inches of water per week for new transplants
  - How and when you water can be immaterial
  - How much you mulch can be immaterial
- Other considerations: None

Confessions of a Black Thumb
Walnut Toxicity

- Victim: Fothergilla
- Cause of the problem
  - Planting plants susceptible to juglones
  - Not removing walnuts planted by neighborhood squirrels

Confessions of a Black Thumb
Walnut Toxicity

- Lessons learned
  - Walnut trees really CAN kill other plants
  - Be careful what you plant near established walnuts
  - Remove volunteer walnut trees promptly

Confessions of a Black Thumb
Walnut Toxicity

- Other considerations
  - Vegetables can have problems with juglones
    - Sensitive: pepper, eggplant, potato, TOMATO
    - Tolerant: beans, beet, carrot, corn, melon, onion, parsnip, squash
  - Making raised beds may help prevent issues
  - DO not use or compost walnut leaves or fruits
  - Cutting down a walnut will not immediately solve your problems
### Confessions of a Black Thumb

**Verticillium Wilt**

- **Victim:** Redbud
- **Causes of the problem**
  - Planting a susceptible host
  - Bad luck

- **Lessons learned**
  - You can inherit plant disease problems
  - Sometimes the stars are against you
  - Sometimes diseases can serve as biocontrol

- **Other considerations**
  - Resistant/immune plants can be your friends
  - Pines, spruces, firs, junipers
  - Beech, birch, ginkgo, hackberry, hawthorn, hickory, honey locust, mountain ash, white oak, bur oak, poplar, serviceberry, sycamore, willow
  - Clean up leaf litter
  - Avoid municipal mulches
  - Fungicides will not likely help

- **Victim(s):** 'Moonglow' juniper (15)
- **Causes of the problem**
  - Really, REALLY poor variety selection
  - Crowding shrubs
  - Planting in an overly shaded area
  - Lack of proper watering
Confessions of a Black Thumb
Phomopsis Tip Blight

- Lessons learned
  - Use appropriate resistant cultivars/varieties
    - "Juniper Diseases" ([https://store.extension.iastate.edu/Product/Juniper-Diseases](https://store.extension.iastate.edu/Product/Juniper-Diseases))
    - "Disease and Insect Resistant Ornamental Plants: Juniperus (Junipers)" ([https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/56372.2](https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/56372.2))
  - DO NOT crowd plants when planting
  - Use the right plant in the right location
  - Water when needed

- Other considerations
  - Avoid over-fertilization (nitrogen)
  - Prune diseased branches, but avoid excessive pruning
  - Decontaminate pruning tools (70% alcohol, disinfectants, 10% bleach)
  - Destroy infected materials (burn where allowed, bury)

Confessions of a Black Thumb
Phomopsis Tip Blight

- Other considerations
  - Consider fungicides where appropriate
    - Is this how you want to spend your time?
    - Apply from bud break through period of rapid growth
    - Apply every 7-21 days
    - Mancozeb, copper, thiophanate-methyl
    - Alternate active ingredients (FRAC Codes)

Confessions of a Black Thumb
Winter Injury

- Victim: Japanese maple
- Cause of the problem
  - Wanting to grow non-hardy plants

Confessions of a Black Thumb
Winter Injury

- Lessons learned
  - Just because you love it, doesn’t mean you should plant it
  - Use appropriate cold hardy plants
  - Pray for
    - Lots of snow
    - A slow, gradual winter cool down
    - Limited temperature fluctuations
    - A slow spring warm up
Confessions of a Black Thumb
Winter Injury

- Other considerations
  - Plant trees and shrubs
    - Properly
    - In protected locations (sensitive plants)
  - Water trees and shrubs properly
  - Protect sensitive plants

Confessions of a Black Thumb
Rhizosphaera Needle Cast

- Victim: ‘Fat Albert’ blue spruce
- Cause of the problem
  - Planting a blue spruce
  - Not taking into account environmental changes in my landscape
  - Overcrowding
  - Lack of proper watering
  - Planting a blue spruce, planting a blue spruce, planting a blue spruce!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Confessions of a Black Thumb
Rhizosphaera Needle Cast

- Lessons learned
  - DO NOT plant blue spruce, DO NOT plant blue spruce, DO NOT PLANT BLUE SPRUCE!!!!!!!!!!!!
  - DO NOT crowd plants
  - Landscape environmental conditions change
  - Plants survive better when cared for properly
  - Plants have a finite life span (some more than others)
  - Sometimes it's better to cut and run

Confessions of a Black Thumb
Rhizosphaera Needle Cast

- Other considerations
  - Plant dwarf blue spruce varieties
  - Thin healthy branches to increase airflow
  - Prune diseased branches
  - Consider fungicides where appropriate
    - Is this how you want to spend your time?
    - Copper, chlorothalonil
    - Ever 3-4 weeks starting at bud break while favorable environmental conditions occur

Confessions of a Black Thumb
Tar Spot

- Victim: Norway maple
- Causes of the problem
  - Lack of time due to work obligations
  - Laziness
Confessions of a Black Thumb
Tar Spot

• Lessons learned
  – Make time for gardening
  – DO NOT be lazy
  – Do proper leaf clean up
    • Fall or early spring
    • Burn where allowed, bury, hot compost

Confessions of a Black Thumb
Tar Spot

• Other considerations
  – Consider fungicides where appropriate
    • Most often never
    • Young or focal point trees
    • Copper applied at bud break, 1/2 and full leaf expansion

Confessions of a Black Thumb
Hosta Virus X

• Victim: Hosta
• Cause of the problem
  – Buying infected plants
  – Not removing infected plants promptly
  – Moving the virus while gardening

Confessions of a Black Thumb
Hosta Virus X

• Lessons learned
  – You can bring diseases home from the store
    • ‘Gold Edger’  • ‘Gold Standard’
    • ‘Golden Tiara’  • ‘Striptease’
    • ‘Sum and Substance’
  – You may not know that the plant is diseased
  – You can easily move this virus
    • Shovels  • Knives
    • Lawnmowers  • String Edgers
Confessions of a Black Thumb

Hosta Virus X

• Other considerations
  – Infected plants should be removed (burn where allowed, bury, hot compost)
  – Be sure to decontaminate
    • 1% Sodium dodecyl sulfate (sodium lauryl sulfate) + 1% Alconox® (2½ Tbsp + 2¾ Tbsp/gal)
    • Trisodium phosphate (14 dry oz/gal)
    • Alcohol dip followed by flaming

Tobacco Rattle

• Victims
  – Bleeding heart
  – Goldenrod
  – Likely many others

• Causes of the problem
  – Buying infected plants
  – Not removing infected plants

Confessions of a Black Thumb

Tobacco Rattle

• Lessons learned
  – You can bring diseases home from the store
  – You may not know that the plant is diseased
  – Diseased plants can survive for a long time
  – Disease symptoms can look quite beautiful
  – Diseased plants can be useful (at least to me)

Confessions of a Black Thumb

Tobacco Rattle

• Other considerations
  – This virus is easily moved from plant to plant (mechanically, via nematodes)
  – This virus is a HUGE deal in potato production
  – Infected plants should be removed (burn where allowed, bury, hot compost)
  – Immune plants are limited
    • Annual phlox, carnation, Datura, sweet William, zinnia

Confessions of a Black Thumb

Tobacco Rattle

• Other considerations
  – You need to decontaminate
    • 1% Sodium dodecyl sulfate (sodium lauryl sulfate) + 1% Alconox® (2½ Tbsp + 2¾ Tbsp/gal)
    • Trisodium phosphate (14 dry oz/gal)
    • Alcohol dip followed by flaming
Confessions of a Black Thumb
Where to Go for Help (?)

Plant Disease Diagnostics Clinic
Department of Plant Pathology
University of Wisconsin-Madison
1630 Linden Drive
Madison, WI 53706-1598
(608) 262-2863
pddc@wisc.edu
https://pddc.wisc.edu
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