

# Maple and sycamore problems

GWF283  
Updated February 2009

Acers are prone to a number of problems. Native species will shrug off attacks, but less robust sycamores and maples may need some extra help.

## Scorched leaves

**Q** What causes leaves to curl and turn brown?

**A** Many maples are prone to scorching, particularly in spring. The delicate leaves are very easily damaged by wind, cold temperatures or salty air. They can also be scorched by the sun, especially the golden and variegated types. Too little water can have the same effect - maples are surface-rooting and easily dry out, especially in containers. Many maples naturally grow at the edges of woodland where the mature trees provide dappled shade and shelter from both wind and rapid temperature fluctuations, so in the garden they do best in a sheltered, semi-shaded position. A moisture-retentive soil and organic mulch will also help.

## Tar spot

**Q** What is tar spot?

**A** Tar spot (*Rhytisma acerinum*) is a fungal disease of sycamores and occasionally other maples. Specific strains are thought to infect different species, so it may not spread to uninfected trees.

**Q** How do I recognise it?

**A** Large, irregular black spots that won't wash or scrape off, found on the upper surfaces of

leaves, are typical of tar spot. The spots are fairly glossy and slightly raised. Often a halo of paler leaf surrounds the spots. They are generally 10-15mm in diameter.

**Q** Could I mistake tar spot for anything else?

**A** Other leaf spots affect acers, such as sycamore giant leaf blotch (*Pleuroceras psuedoplatini*) which features brown circular spots on leaves and black veins. White spots are caused by a fungal disease (*Cristulariella depraedans*). Neither is common or serious. Both are controlled in the same way as tar spot.

**Q** When should I expect tar spot?

**A** The young leaves are infected in the spring, by spores released from fallen dead leaves nearby. Pale patches form on these newly affected leaves, but you seldom notice these. Black tar spots develop from mid-summer. These are made up of a mass of fungal strands or mycelium. They persist on the ground through the winter, developing spores called asciospores, which go on to re-infect new leaves in spring.

**Q** Does tar spot do serious damage?

**A** Tar spot is unsightly and can

ruin the effect of fancy sycamores such as *Acer pseudoplatanus* 'Brilliantissium'. However, as it attacks late in the summer, it doesn't do serious damage to the tree, though the leaves may fall slightly earlier.

**Q** What can I do about tar spot?

**A** Usually the damage is too insignificant or the tree is too large for spraying to be worthwhile. Sprays of a fungicide containing copper, applied several times from bud burst at two-week intervals covering all the leaf area, may protect small precious trees.

Collecting up and burning, burying or throwing away affected leaves in autumn may limit the disease the following year.

## Scale insect

**Q** What are scale insects?

**A** Look out for scale-encrusted bark. Beneath the armoured scale is a very small, flattened, sap-sucking insect. Usually twigs, branches and trunks are affected, but leaves can also be colonised. Many are dull-coloured scales that take some spotting, but others have a pale woolly coating of waxy threads. When present in large numbers they secrete a sugary substance called

honeydew that covers the leaves. The honeydew often gets colonised by sooty moulds, blackening the leaves.

**Q** What can I do to control scale insects?

**A** If you can catch an infestation in its early stages, the scales can be brushed off with an old toothbrush and soapy water. Insecticides cannot get into the scales, so aim to catch the more vulnerable juvenile crawler stage, just after they hatch. Apply two sprays about two weeks apart in mid-June and early July. Use a contact

insecticide and try to cover the entire bark surface as well as beneath the leaves. Organic gardeners should try insecticides based on fatty acids or soap.

**Gall mite**

**Q** Are sycamore galls worth worrying about?

**A** No. This tiny mite (*Eriophyes macrorhynchus*) affects sycamores and hedgerow maples, producing masses of tiny pinhead-sized raised areas. These can be reddish or yellow, and occur from spring until leaf fall. There is no chemical control. However,

picking off and burning, burying or binning affected leaves may limit attacks the following year.

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