How to deal with bacterial canker

This deadly disease is the biggest killer of stone-fruit trees. However, if you act quickly enough, you can limit the damage and save valuable trees.

**Q** What is bacterial canker?

**A** Bacterial canker is the biggest killer of almonds, cherries, peaches, plums and nectarines. It affects both ornamental and fruiting varieties of these trees. The canker kills branches, causing the tree to die back until it eventually perishes.

**Q** Is it called anything else?

**A** Bacterial canker is sometimes called bacteriosis, gummosis or blossom blast.

**Q** What causes it?

**A** Unlike most tree diseases, this is caused by a bacterium, *Pseudomonas morsprunorum*.

**Q** How do I recognise bacterial canker?

**A** Suspect this disease if your tree has cankers, dying branches and twigs, or gum on the bark. Cankers are splits in the bark, which are usually longer than they are wide. They start at the base of infected buds, spreading above the point of infection, then on to the sides or below. Often a great deal of gum is exuded at the edge of the canker.

The disease starts in the spring. Inside the cankered areas, bark becomes darker, looks wet and shrivels. Affected areas are usually slightly sunken. Cankers have a sour smell and will often run right round a branch, causing the shoot beyond to wither and die.

However, the cankers also spread lengthways along the stem. The infected stem will often bend towards the side that is cankered.

**Q** What symptoms point to canker infection?

**A** Look for cankers if any of the following occur:

- **Tree death** Look for cankers on the trunk - when these girdle, the whole tree will die.
- **Branch dieback** Look for cankers on branches and especially the base of branches - when these girdle the whole branch it will die.
- **Shoot wilt** Young shoots die back in spring and early summer.
- **Blossom blast** Flowering shoots wither in spring and early summer.
- **Leaf spots and shotholes** Leaves are peppered with dark spots and later with small holes.

**Q** Could it be mistaken for anything else?

**A** Plums and damsons often produce gum naturally, although viruses or drought could be involved. Dieback of branches in cherries and plums is quite common from other causes. It could be natural dieback followed by opportunistic fungal infection, or damage by drought.

If the foliage is silvery or if purple/brown crust-like fungal bodies form on the stems, suspect silver leaf; see our Which? works for you.
Which? members can call our gardening experts during one of our regular phone-ins. See Which? Gardening magazine for details.