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Aster Yellows Disease by Lydia Holley

Last year, I noticed some of my coneflowers bloomed green instead of purple. Some exhibited extra rosette blooms. I thought they were so cute, and wondered if they were due to a mutation or odd seedling. No, I was wrong. These coneflowers have aster yellows.



Aster yellows affects numerous plants, the most common being coneflowers (echinacea), asters, marigolds, coreopsis, carrots and potatoes. Other commonly grown garden plants such as begonias, cannas, chrysanthemums, daisies, gaillardias, milkweeds, rudbeckias, and zinnas can be affected as well as numerous crops such as broccoli, cabbage, lettuce, spinach, squash, and tomatoes. Even weeds are susceptible. Dandelions, plantains and thistles are among just some of the weeds that may get and help spread this disease.

The list of plants able to acquire this disease seems to go on and on as over 300 species of plants can be affected by this bacteria. The bacteria is extremely small and lacks a cell wall, thus it is called a phytoplasma. This phytoplasma lives in the plant's phloem. It is spread from plant to plant by leafhoppers.

Since there is no cure, it is important to remove the plants infected by aster yellows in order to prevent its spread. Since aster yellows is rarely fatal, if you do not destroy the plant, it can continue to spread the disease for years. And since weeds can also act as host plants, continued weeding around the affected area is also important.

Most plants with woody stems, such as shrubs, do not seem to acquire aster yellows, so planting a shrub as a replacement is possible. Otherwise, since the roots may be affected, it is best not to replant immediately, although replanting later is fine—the soil will not continue to sustain the bacteria. However, bulbs, corms and tubers may continue to carry the disease.

In the future, a watchful eye is important, and knowledge of the disease is imperative. I only wish I had known to destroy these plants last year. You can bet I will be watching for the signs of aster yellows from now on.

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