

Skin Deep

Paul Hetzler, ISA Certified Arborist

Being an arborist, I'm of course very mindful of complexion. Bruises and warts catch my eye, as well as scabs, cuts, and even those out-of-place whiskers that appear out of nowhere. I might be describing my old-guy skin, but I'm talking about bumps and marks that accumulate on leaves over the summer.

I suppose if we had to stand outside day and night all season, our skin would develop issues too. Those who work or play much outdoors need to be concerned about skin spots that suddenly show up. With tree leaves, that's not the case—even the ugliest “skin” condition is generally no cause for concern.

One of the more alarming leaf disorders is called tar spot, whose symptoms are black blobs that often show up in late summer or early fall. Tar spot affects Norway, silver, red and sugar maples, in order of severity. The spots, which really do look like drips of roofing tar, seem to appear overnight, and sometimes cover much of the leaf. While it may look like a serious affliction, it's really just a cosmetic issue (meaning if you're good with cosmetics you can probably make your tree look pretty again).

Unfortunately, tar spots are not a natural source of hydrocarbons, and can't be processed into crude oil. As disappointing as that may be, at least tar spot is not a problem. Spots are caused by several different species of fungi in the genus *Rhytisma*, which I mention because some of you play Scrabble.

If your tree's leaves have sprouted tiny spindle-shaped structures that make it appear that the leaves need a shave, don't worry. These are tiny galls, formed when a minute arachnid called an eriophyid (go for a triple score on that word) mite laid an egg, along with a dose of a plant hormone which directed the leaf to grow a little home for her young one.

Depending on the species of mite, these galls can be green, yellow, red or pink. Some are squat and thick, resembling a wart, but they are all completely harmless. Good thing, too, because galls shield the mites from anything you could spray on them anyway.

Believe it or not, scabs are caused by a disease called scab. I think it was late on a Friday when scab and tar spot were named, probably by a new intern who was later reprimanded for “making sense.” It affects apple, crabapple, hawthorn, juneberry and other trees in the rose family. Scab causes affected leaves to drop early, and is much worse in wet seasons when it can defoliate a tree by mid-summer.

It's a serious problem for orchardists because it causes blemishes on fruit in addition to weakening the tree, so they routinely spray fungicides starting at bud break. Other ways of managing scab include proper pruning, increasing air flow and access to sun, and planting scab-resistant varieties.

High winds, especially early-season events, can tatter leaves, a condition called “leaf tatter.” (Same intern, don't you think?) Japanese beetles, caterpillars, sawflies and other insects chew on leaves over the summer. Leaf-cutter moth larvae remove perfectly scribed circles from maple leaves, making it look as if someone got into the office supplies and went crazy with a hole-punch. All in all, many trees look bedraggled by September. Should you be worried?

Here's a secret: by late summer, trees don't “need” their leaves any more. While this is true, it's akin to saying you don't need another ten bucks at the end of the year. It would be nice, but it's not going to change the big picture. A deciduous tree expends a huge amount of energy investing in new leaves each spring, and its leaves have to make enough sugar from sunlight to “repay” the tree, plus a little extra for rainy days. By early August, trees have recouped their investment along with a pile of interest.

Late-season leaf disorders are superficial and no cause for concern. But if you're embarrassed by your tree's appearance come late summer, you can always try cosmetics.

Paul Hetzler has been an ISA-Certified Arborist since 1996, and is a member of ISA-Ontario, the Canadian Institute of Forestry, and the Society of American Foresters. His book “Shady Characters: Plant Vampires, Caterpillar Soup, Leprechaun Trees and Other Hilarities of the Natural World,” is available on amazon.ca