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For more information, contact Jesse Gilmore  
Horticulture Agent, Wildcat Extension District  
[jr637@ksu.edu](mailto:jr637@ksu.edu), (620) 724-8233

## Scouting Plants Will Catch Problems Ahead of Time

Your sense of sight is important for assessing the health of your plants, but sometimes it can be hard to notice problems until they are severe. Catching these problems early can be the difference between a long-living plant and a plant on death's door. Some problems can be easier to notice than others, and while the *cause* of the symptoms might not be immediately apparent, the symptoms present may signal that you need to take a closer look at your plants and scout them for the root of the problem.

Stunting is one of the most obvious symptoms to see, especially when there are normal-sized plants nearby to compare against. Color is one other giveaway that something is wrong. Discoloration can identify death, physical damage from the environment or feeding, or nutrient deficiencies. For example, if you have white oaks, you might start noticing some small dieback of leaves near the tips of branches, but not know what's causing the problem. This is the result of feeding from an insect called Kermes Scale, which are easier to notice on the twigs if you can get a close-up look at the branches showing these symptoms.

This concept of scouting can be vital to ensuring the immediate health of the plant, especially if you can catch problems early. Typically, when plant experts talk about scouting plants, they are referring to looking for insects and insect damage. However, scouting can refer to looking for any symptom of a plant problem, or for insects that have not yet begun causing problems. Any problem that can be caught and controlled early can be scouted.

Squash bugs are a great example of the merits of scouting. Squash bug eggs were laid about a month ago on the underside of zucchini leaves, and they are one of the most common pest questions I receive. Scouting for these eggs and removing them before they hatch will save you a lot of future headaches. Once the eggs hatch, the nymphs will begin to feed, and once the nymphs grow into adults, their feeding damage can be so severe that they will kill off zucchini plants outright. However, as adults, most insecticide sprays will be ineffective at killing the bugs, which is why you need to catch them early. Looking for eggs near the middle of June and pulling any off the plant will keep populations low and reduce the amount of spraying you will need to do to keep your vegetable plants healthy.

Sometimes, you will not be able to catch bugs before they begin damaging your plants. The next step to scouting is to assess the level of damage and determine if the plant is in danger, and how much damage is acceptable before control is warranted. This acceptable damage level will vary

depending on the purpose of the plant. Ornamental plants grown for their looks will obviously have a lower damage threshold than other plants since the feeding of insects quickly detracts from the plant's looks. For fruits and vegetables, damage to the non-edible parts of a plant will be more tolerable, especially if the edible part of the plant is already mostly grown. However, you may want to consider still trying to control the problem. Diseases and insects both reproduce and spread, so populations can still get out of hand, even if the plant is relatively unaffected. Controlling now may be the best option to ensure that the problem is not worse in future growing seasons.

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