

Black Sooty Mold

By Deborah Birge, Fort Bend Master Gardener

Q: What is this black stuff on my lemon tree leaves? How do I get rid of it?

A: What you have on your leaves and fruit is [black sooty mold](#). We have a number of people complaining of sooty mold this year because we had a cool, mild, wet winter followed by high heat and humidity. Perfect growing conditions.

Sooty molds are fungi growing and feeding on honeydew. Honeydew is produced by sap sucking insects feeding on your plant. These insects include white fly, scale, mealybug, psyllids, aphids, just to name a few. It is important to deal with the insect as well as the sooty mold.



Sooty mold can be a real problem for plants by restricting the sun's ability to penetrate to the leaf reducing the plant's ability to perform photosynthesis. This reduces tree vigor and can result in leaf and fruit drop.

First step is to identify the insect. Should it be scale or aphids, look for fire ants at the bottom or near to the tree trunk. Fire ants will farm the insect in order to harvest and eat the honeydew. You must control both the sap sucking insect and the ants.

Non-chemical control of the insects will be difficult but not impossible. Do hit the foliage with a hard water spray early in the morning for several days and then several times a week thereafter. You can also use an insecticidal soap but only if you don't see any beneficial insects such as lady bugs or predators such as lizards. A dormant oil can be used to suffocate the insects if the temperature is under 85 degrees.

Purchase a good fire ant poison and use as directed. Should you need to use a chemical for insect management, do read the label, make sure it includes control of the insect you are targeting, then use as instructed.