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Oleanders under attack **By Laura Murphy**

Oleanders are a popular landscape plant in Arizona. Although they are not native, they do very well in our very tough conditions. The oleander has become almost an icon for many desert areas. But a small bug and a bacteria are working to change that forever.

Oleander leaf scorch is one of the most lethal diseases known to infect oleanders. It was identified in southern California in the early 1990's. Since that time it has continued to spread and has caused wide-spread devastation. In the original area identified in California, there are essentially no oleanders left. Miles of oleanders had to be removed that were planted along freeways, golf courses and property boundaries. This complete destruction has repeated itself everywhere it has spread to. The bacterium was found in Phoenix in 2004.

Experts from the Arizona Department of Agriculture had expected it to arrive eventually. It is believed to have come in from California on a truck transporting plants. Now that it is in Arizona, it is just a matter of time before it arrives here. There is no good treatment at this time and it is fatal.





This disease is caused by a strain of bacteria called *Xylella fastidiosa*. There are many different strains, each infecting different plants. The bacterium is carried from a diseased plant to a healthy one by small, sap sucking insects - in Arizona it is the smoke-tree sharpshooter.

The symptoms of scorch disease are easy to confuse with other problems. It starts with a yellowing of the leaves in a checkerboard pattern. This is followed by a scorching of the leaf tips and margins. These symptoms look very similar to salt burn, nutrient deficiencies or lack of water. However the symptoms do not get better with fertilization or more water. Eventually tips and then branches die back. The plant usually dies within 2 years.

According to the University of Arizona Plant Pathology department, there is no control. Because it is a bacterial infection, some people have tried plant antibiotics injected in the soil or in the trunk. While this does seem to have limited, very short term benefits it does not change the outcome. Plants that become infected should be removed as soon as possible to slow the spread of the disease.

It is not known at this time if the disease can be transmitted from a diseased plant to a healthy one from pruning equipment. There are many diseases in which this does occur. For safety sake and as a matter of practice it is a good idea to disinfect your pruning tools between plants. This is easily

done by soaking or saturating in a 10% bleach solution. At the end of your pruning session, make sure to follow by a plain water rinse and an oiling when fully dry to prevent rust.

What does all this mean for your landscape? There is no need to rush out and replace your existing oleanders or stock up on plant antibiotics. It took almost 15 years to get from southern California to Phoenix. It could take 25 years to get here, or it could arrive tomorrow. The smoke-tree sharpshooter may be here in small numbers or it might be well established with large populations. The best approach at this time is to simply be aware of the disease.

If you have oleanders just keep a watch on them. If you are planning on planting oleanders there is some evidence to suggest that the petite varieties seem to do better than the standard ones. If you are planning on planting a long row of them such as along a fence line, you might consider another plant. An individual plant in the landscape can be replaced relatively easy, but a 50 or 100 foot row would be heartbreaking to lose.

Several other plants have many of the oleander landscape attributes. For example Arizona rosewood is a good alternative. The leaves and growth habits are similar, growing quickly to 15 feet. It is an Arizona native and does not require much water. The flowers are creamy-white and are followed by berries that the birds relish.

Hopbush is also an Arizona native and has similar growth characteristics. It is a fast grower with willow like leaves and interesting seed pods. It is very drought tolerant and tolerates our alkaline soil and water as well. It also will grow from 6 to 15 feet tall and wide depending on amount of water.

While both of these excellent plants can give the same hedge effect and growth characteristics, neither of them can match the beautiful flower color and production of the oleander. If you love oleanders it will be a sad day when the bacterium finally arrives. Until then, enjoy them.

Laura Murphy is a Lake Havasu City Master Gardener. For more information, contact the Lake Havasu City Master Gardeners by calling their Hot Line at 505-4105. Visit us at Home Garden Day, the first Tuesday of each month from 11-1 at the Library.

**CONTACT: VICKI COOMBS
ADMINISTRATIVE ASST
THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
MOHAVE COUNTY
COOPERATIVE EXTENSION
101 E BEALE ST STE A
KINGMAN AZ 86401-5808
928 753-3788/928 753-1665 (FAX)
mohavece@cals.arizona.edu**

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