

Q: My pear tree looks terrible! Random limbs are dying back but some of them look fine. Can you find out the problem from this picture? – Anonymous in NE Tennessee

A: Fireblight is a common disease on apple and pear trees, and it can be fairly noticeable this time of year. The most evident damage from fireblight is shoot blight where branch tips dieback, turn dark brown or black and the leaves remain attached. Very often the tip curls over to resemble a shepherd's hook.

The infection occurs during early spring when temperatures reach 65°F and there is moisture present. The worst seasons for fireblight infections are when we have a wet spring – particularly during bloom – as the bacteria infects the tree through natural openings in the leaves and flowers.

When planting new trees select varieties that are resistant to fireblight which are less likely to have severe problems. Preventative sprays of the antibiotic streptomycin can be used, but thorough coverage is important, and the applications must occur before infection.

Copper based fungicides sprays might reduce the levels of overwintering bacteria but aren't sufficient alone to prevent the disease. A necessary control tactic, even when sprays are implemented, is the removal of the overwintering infected, or blighted, tissues. Pruning 10 to 12 inches below any infected tissues and removing those prunings from the orchard removes the overwintering source of the disease reducing the likely number of infections. This pruning should occur during the dormant season of the tree. February is an ideal time. – Your Friendly Master Gardener

Did you know that August is an important time for your garden? August tips for your plant or flower gardens are:

- Remove old plants which have stopped producing to eliminate a shelter for insects and disease organisms.
- Check the soil moisture of container grown vegetables and flowers daily. As the temperature rises, some plants may need water twice a day
- Control weeds before they go to seed. Every weed that produces seed means more trouble next year.
- This is a good time to order and plant spring flowering bulbs for next year's early flower display. Plan for different flowering times to extend the season.

The Master Gardener Program is offered by the University of Tennessee Extension. The purpose of the Master Gardener program is to train people as horticultural-educated volunteers. These volunteers work in partnership with the local Extension office in their counties to expand educational outreach, providing home gardeners with researched-based information.