

Plant disease clinic diagnoses hort ailments

ROCK SPRINGS — "The symptoms are easy to describe, but the cause of plant problems is often difficult," says John Peplinski, the man who usually has the answers.

As manager of the Plant Disease Clinic at Penn State, Peplinski offers diagnoses to owners of nearly 2,000 ailing plants a year. In a small facility in the Buckhout Laboratory on Penn State's main campus, he receives odd-looking branches, leaves, or entire plants from residents and businesses around the state.

Plant owners send their ailing plants to the clinic at Penn State. When the cause of the damage is discovered, the plant owners are referred to materials that help them wipe out, fight, or compensate for the problem. If there is no definite control, he offers possible suggestions.

"Gardeners and homeowners know if they have a problem they can turn to us," he says.

So do commercial growers. Almost 50 percent of the specimens the clinic receives are from commercial farm and garden operations. "This summer, Peplinski says, he has received many strawberry samples that have Red Stele, a root rotting disease."

Summer is the peak season.

Peplinski opens up the clinic's refrigerator, which is full of plants, leaves and branches stuffed in plastic bags. Some still have to be examined. Others he is saving until the fungi or bacteria in the culture dish can be identified. It looks like there is no way to keep order, but he does.

Peplinski expects approximately 300 samples a month during the summer; and things don't slow

down until fall. "You never know what to expect," he says. "We see different diseases all the time. Weather conditions, of course, change constantly and that affects plants."

Through county Extension offices, residents can obtain kits for mailing plant specimens or soil samples to the disease clinic. Information about the plant's environment is required and in-

structions about proper mailing procedures are included. Adherence of the kit's instructions makes it much easier for the clinic to determine a cause of disease. Peplinski says that quite a few samples from home gardens come in during the summer.

Yes, but does he make house calls? Occasionally. He takes samples from trees on campus, especially to identify those with

Dutch Elm disease. Any tree with the disease is immediately cut down. Also, a few years ago, the clinic made the first identification of pine wood nematodes in Pennsylvania.

Peplinski also consults Extension specialists in entomology, agronomy, horticulture and forestry. In the lab, his companions are a student aide, the Index of Plant Disease in the U.S. manual and a microcomputer.

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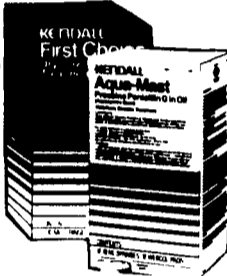
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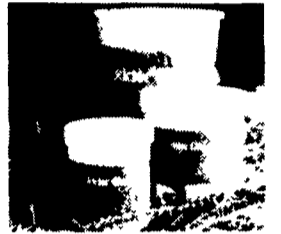
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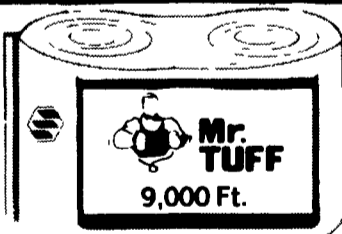
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