
Determining Problems of Woody Ornamentals Over the Phone

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Basic Procedures

1. Ask most of your questions so that they cannot be answered by a yes or a no.
2. If you have an opinion early on, keep it to yourself and try to eliminate everything else first.
3. Don't be afraid to say you don't know, and don't feel that you have to apologize for not knowing.
4. Never be absolutely positive in your diagnosis - tell the customer what you think is the problem.
5. If you have any doubt about recommendations, tell the customer you will check and call them back.
6. If there is a third party involved or there is any possibility of legal repercussions, recommend that the customer call the local Extension Service office.
7. Remember that the University of Florida in Gainesville has diagnostic services available. The customer can call the local Extension Service office for details and costs.
8. Give the customer your best recommendation, don't let them put words in your mouth and don't worry about telling them something they don't want to hear.
9. If a customer says that they heard or read that something should be done a certain way, and ask you if you agree, answer honestly. Never try to discredit or put down the person or article being quoted. Doing so will destroy your credibility. Instead say "Perhaps that's the experience of that person, but the University of Florida (or the Extension Service) believes that _____". Quoting the University of Florida or the Extension Service gives you immediate credibility.
10. If the person seems happy with the way they are doing things, no matter how foolish or wrong it may seem to you, don't come out and tell them they are doing something wrong! Simply suggest other ways to accomplish their desired goal. Only an open mind will accept suggestions to change.

Basic Information to Ask For

1. "What type of plant is it?" This can be a difficult question for a homeowner to answer but it is the basic question that needs to be answered.

Purpose of the Question: If you understand the Key Plants / Key Pests concept, then knowing the type of plant can tell you which questions to ask next. For example, if the customer is having trouble with their Pittosporum, the next question might be "How much water are they getting?" (Pittosporum are notoriously touchy about being overwatered.)

2. "How long has the plant been in the ground?"

Purpose of the Question: If the plant is newly planted or has been in the ground for six months or less, that might suggest a problem with the installation or aftercare. If the plant has been in the ground for years without a problem, a different set of questions might be in order.

3. "Are other plants nearby showing the same symptoms?" "Are they all the same type of plant?"

Purpose of the Question: A disease usually starts out in one area and then spreads out. Not all of the same type of plants die out all at once from disease. If many plants are dying in the same area, it is unlikely you are dealing with a disease. You need to ask about watering techniques and details or chemical applications that may have occurred around the plants in question.

4. "What are the symptoms?" You need a description of the visible signs and symptoms in the customer's own words.

Purpose of the Question: Customers may have a suspicion of what the problem is, but hope it isn't so (especially if they think might be something they did). Getting them to tell more about the condition in their own words give you some clues to work with. Ask if the condition started on the older leaves or the younger leaves. If the problem is on the older leaves but limited to the edges, a disease is not likely and further questions need to determine watering practices and chemical applications. If the condition is on the younger leaves, ask the customer to check carefully for insects or evidence of insects. Most insects prefer to feed on newer rather than older leaves. Disease, however, will attack new growth but doesn't always show up as a symptom until it is older.

5. "How long has the condition been occurring and when did it start?"

Purpose of the Question: When a customer says that their plant died overnight, try to ask questions that allow you to determine whether it actually took longer and the customer missed it. If the plant did die in just a few days, ask questions concerning chemicals. No disease kills plants that quickly. Chemicals, however can cause a plant to go from green to brown in just a few days with very little yellow in between.

Chemical Information to Ask For

To help determine if chemicals were involved in the problem, here are some questions to ask.

1. "What have you fertilized with, how long ago and how did you fertilize?"

Purpose of the Question: Some customers use weed and feed products at the wrong time of year and many use them improperly. If these products were used,

how far from shallow rooted plants, were they used? Was there a lot of rain afterwards that could have floated the product down to the plants? Did they treat the whole area the same whether it had weeds or not, or did they go over the weedy area a second time, thus over-applying the chemical? If they used straight fertilizer, was it the right time of year and were the plants under moisture stress at the time? Were the plants wet at the time of fertilizing? How close to the main stems did the customer get with the fertilizer?

2. "What other chemicals could have been applied around these plants?"

Purpose of Question: Most customer's perception of what can cause a problem is quite narrow. When answering these questions, many say "only an insecticide or fungicide applied by their lawn spray company." Except for the remote possibility of gross incompetence by the spray company's employee, these chemicals can be eliminated as a potential cause for a plant problem. Instead, ask about these additional items to expand the possibilities:

Have you cleaned your sidewalk or pool deck with strong chemicals, such as Muratic acid?

Have you cleaned the exterior of your house with TSP? (trisodium phosphate)

Where does your septic tank drain field run?

Where does the backwash from your pool or your neighbor's pool go?

Have you replaced the siding on your house or put on a new roof lately?

Irrigation Information to Ask For

To help determine if watering is a partial cause of the problem, here are some suggested questions:

1. "Do you have an irrigation system?"

Purpose of the Question: If they do have a system, ask if they leave it on a timer or if they operate it manually. What is the frequency (how often does it run?). What is the duration (How long does it run?).

2. "When you do water, how do you water?"

Purpose of the question: To find out if they are watering by placing a hose near the plant or actively doing it by hand.

3. "Do you have dollarweed growing in your yard?"

Purpose of the Question: The presence of dollarweeds can indicate that the soil stays wet for long periods (low lying or too much irrigation) or has an aeration problem.

4. "When you dig a hole during the rainy season, does it ever fill with water?"

Purpose of the Question: To give some background on the depth of the water table. If they answer "yes" then ask if they plant lower than the surrounding soil or higher than the surrounding soil. In a wet site, plants should be planted somewhat higher than the surrounding soil to allow for settling and mulching.

5. "Does water stand in the place you have this plant?"

Purpose of the Question: To determine whether this area is low lying. An alternative might be to ask whether there is a lot of shade in this spot and whether the ground is ever mushy.

Purpose of the Question: Some customers have a slope to their property. When asked if they ever have standing water, some will respond "No, it is well drained."

When questioned further, however, you may find out that they have good run-off but in fact have poor drainage.

6. "Is the plant located near a roof without a gutter, a downspout or any situation that collects water and dumps it on this plant?"

Purpose of the Question: If this is the case, the plant in question could be receiving 10 times as much water as another similar plant just a few feet away.

7. "Do you have black plastic under your mulch?"

Purpose of the Question: Eventually, under black plastic, the soil becomes poorly aerated. The black plastic impedes air and gas exchange.

Other Information to Ask For

These questions are intended to add information if you still can't make a reasonable guess.

1. "Is the bark of the stem intact all the way from the ground with no sawdust or sap coming out?"

Purpose of the Question: If this question does nothing else, it causes the customer to look closely at the plant. If ants have built a nest near the base, the customer should be able to see it. If sawdust is coming out (unlikely on a woody shrub) borers should be suspected. If the bark is splitting away, the plant may have been planted too deeply or past cold damage may be a problem depending on the species.

2. "How close is the grass to the stem or trunk of the plant?"

Purpose of the Question: The main point of this question is to find out how they are keeping the grass down around the stem if they are not pulling it out. Weed eaters can easily girdle and kill shrubs if not used properly. Mowers, too can damage shrubs.

3. "Is there any swelling or sunken areas on the trunk or stem?"

Purpose of the Question: These would indicate galls or cankers which could be due to insects or fungus depending on the species of the plant.

4. "If the plant has been in the ground for less than about 8 weeks, did you use any Organic Peat or Peat Humus in the planting hole and, if so, was it mixed well?"

Purpose of the Question: The products labeled Organic Peat or Peat Humus are the consistency of muck. These products, if not well mixed with the native soil, has been known to damage or kill plants due to lack of aeration.

Jumping to Conclusions

Sometimes you can reasonably jump to conclusions. When a customer tells you the following:

1. Something is eating the leaves off my plant.

Response: If you are reasonably convinced the leaves haven't fallen off the plant due to something else, then the recommendation could be made for a product for chewing insects, depending on the type of plant.

2. The leaves of my plant have turned black.

Response: Talk with them about sooty mold and sucking insects and make an appropriate recommendation.

3. Grey looking growth occurring on the trunks and stems of my plants.

Response: Talk with them about lichens.

4. White fluffy material on the stems of my plants.

Response: If roses or crape myrtle, discuss powdery mildew. On other plants it might be one of several forms of scale.

5. Curley leaves on my plants out towards the ends.

Response: Talk with the customer about aphids and make a recommendation appropriate to the type of plant.

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