



YARD ODDITY

adapted from a Cornell Plant Pathology Fact Sheet
by Joel W. Allen, Extension Educator

Every summer we receive inquiries from frantic homeowners complaining about brown- to black tar-like spots being found all over their home, porch, deck, car, windows and even lawn ornaments. These spots often give the impression that someone sprayed carelessly with brown or black spray paint and it blew about the yard leaving these conspicuous spots everywhere. Or that someone shook out a paint brush to dry it. These spots show up vividly on light siding or a white car, for example.

These spots are actually packets of spores produced by the fungus, *Sphaerobolus stellatus*, common to a group of fungi referred to as “shotgun” or “artillery” fungi. Their place in the world is to help break down twigs, leaves, (generally wood products) and other plant debris, returning stored nutrients and organic matter to the soil - a good thing. It readily colonizes on wood sheds, wood benches, and in garden beds mulched with wood chips or other organic materials. For much of the year it grows inconspicuously as a microscopic, thread-like body. But when it is stimulated by cool, moist weather or high humidity, it forms a buff-colored sphere about 1/16 to 1/8 inch in diameter.

Artillery fungi use an interesting mechanism to disperse their spores (seeds). The dark brown spores, called peridioles, sit on top of specialized cup-shaped cells which accumulate water and cell contents. When enough liquid has accumulated, these cupped cells invert causing a burst, propelling these peridioles as high or far as 20 plus feet where they can adhere to new surfaces. Some people claim they have actually heard this audible pop as the spores are discharged.

According to Dr. George Hudler, plant pathologist at Cornell University, the best way to manage the problem is to simply wash the spots off surfaces with soap and water as quickly as you can before they dry and harden on. There are no fungicides registered to control *Sphaerobolus*. We seldom recommend you remove the mulch because the benefits from the mulch generally outweigh the problem of *Sphaerobolus* spore packets. Stirring up the mulch with a garden rake or spade fork a couple times during the growing season or adding a thin layer of fresh mulch will keep this problem to a minimum, if not stop it totally. Be careful in trying to remove the spots from important or sensitive surfaces. The spots do not come off easily and more damage can be caused by the wire brush or steel wool than from the spots. Repainting may help, but only until the spores are released again, this season or next. Because the fungi are sensitive to light, the spores are usually projected towards it and that of light colored surfaces. And avoid resorting to using harsh cleaning materials around plant material.

It has been suggested that artillery fungi are more often associated with wood mulches versus bark mulches and the increased use of wood products in potting and soil media. Composting these materials and then using as a soil amendment rather than as a mulch, could eliminate the artillery problem altogether. It has also been noted that artillery fungi generally fall into the category of “molds” according to many insurance companies, so claiming damage on your insurance may not be feasible, but you can ask.

And speaking of yard oddities, there are a couple of others that fall into the same category as these fungi or molds. They are more commonly called slime molds, belonging to a class of fungi, the Myxomycetes, which are characterized by the production of relatively large, single-celled, multinucleate bodies called plasmodia. Plasmodia are the feeding stages of slime molds that can often be found on lawns, small plants, groundcovers, and mulch looking like someone or thing had regurgitated their meal. It is disgusting looking and it will harden as a crusty mass in short order. It may suffocate the plant material beneath it so removing it with a shovel may be necessary.

Additional gardening questions can be addressed to the Master Gardener volunteers of Cornell Cooperative Extension of Columbia County, 479 Route 66, Hudson, NY 12534 by phone at (518) 828-3346 or via email at columbia@cornell.edu