BEFORE YOU SPRAY, READ THIS

The very first step in dealing with a sick plant is to find out why the plant is sick. 60-70% of plant problems sent the WSU Extension have cultural or environmental origins. Spraying pesticides will not help and may actually cause additional problems.

Pesticides are for specific pests on specific plants. Some plants are sensitive to some pesticides. If you apply a proper pesticide for a pest, but the plant is sensitive to the chemical, you can severely damage the plant. Sometimes this causes more damage than the pest itself would have caused.

Insecticides have no effect on fungi—and fungicides don’t kill insects. Know what the problem is and use the correct solution for the problem.

Beneficial insects that eat pests such as aphids, caterpillars or slugs (and therefore naturally keep pest populations down) are often more sensitive to pesticides than the pests themselves.

Pests have different life cycles and different tolerances to insecticides. To be effective, you must apply a pesticide when the pest is in a vulnerable life stage and while it is still present.

Spraying could be a waste of time and money and could be hazardous to the ecological balance in your yard if the proper amount and timing of the spray is not followed for a given pest. READ THE LABEL CAREFULLY!

Some pesticides—especially fungicides—are only preventive. Plants won’t heal the damage already present, but, if the spray is timed properly, it may prevent new infections.

PEST IDENTIFICATION RESOURCES
There are many resources to help you know what is making your plant sick. If you need to identify a pest, first obtain a specimen of the pest/problem. Then refer to gardening books or pest identification and control publications available from WSU Extension. You can also take the sample to a Master Gardener clinic, a local nursery or a commercial pest control business.

ALTERNATIVES TO SPRAYING
Knowing the plant and meeting its cultural needs helps prevent many plant problems. A healthy plant can survive attacks by insects and diseases—frequently with no spraying or intervention on the part of the homeowner. Please also read Community Horticulture fact sheet #94, Integrated Pest Management in the Landscape.

A certain amount of damage from insects or disease is normal and the plant can usually sustain a fair amount before its health is adversely affected. The issue may be more aesthetic than one of the plant health. If plant injury is slight, the affected leaves could be hand picked or just left alone. Being able to tolerate a few holes in leaves or other small amounts of damage could be looked upon as your contribution to the natural balance in your yard.
Look for less toxic means of controlling infestations: hand-picking or pruning out infested leaves or branches; trapping; spraying insects off with the spray of water from a hose; changing watering or fertilizing practices so as not to encourage pests; etc. When choosing new plants for the garden, seek out pest-resistant varieties.

CONSIDERATIONS WHEN PESTICIDES ARE USED
You are liable for any damage your spray causes to neighboring property—caused by wind drift or the carrying of the pesticides off your property by water runoff. You are also negligent if you use the pesticide on a plant not listed on the label or at a dosage greater than the label allows.

Any use not specified on the label is a violation of federal and state laws.

Do not let spray drift onto food crops (fruits, vegetables, herbs, berries, etc.) unless it is labeled for those crops and the number of days before harvest is allowed.

Do not let the spray drift into neighboring yards unless you have consulted with them in advance. Toys, barbecues, picnic tables, etc. should be moved indoors or covered. Make sure children and pests are safely inside and follow label instructions carefully concerning when they can safely be allowed back into the sprayed area.

Don’t spray on windy days or allow insecticides to drift onto blooming plants or weeds where bees might encounter it. Bees can carry the toxins back to the hive and kill off the entire hive.

Slug bait can be attractive to dogs and can make pets sick if eaten directly or accidentally (as when cats groom themselves after having contacted bait in the garden). Slug bait is also toxic to birds and other wildlife. Birds feeding on treated areas may be killed. It is best to put the slug bait under a board or in a trap. Put the bait (beer works well) in the bottom of the carton and snap on the lid.

Place the trap where slugs have been a problem. The bait will stay dry and effective for a long time, but will be safely away from children and pets.

Don’t over-apply pesticides. Many of the pesticides are easily carried by runoff water into groundwater, streams, lakes, wetlands, and Puget Sound. Birds, fish and other wildlife can be killed because of your negligence.

Don’t dispose of unused chemicals in sewers or dump them down the drain. Sewage treatment does not filter out pesticides and the chemicals eventually make it into Puget Sound. Take unused, old or unwanted chemicals to a hazardous household waste pickup point for disposal.

BEFORE YOU SPRAY—CHECKLIST
Do you know what insect/disease you are spraying for?
Are the host plant (or situation) and the pest/disease you are spraying for listed on the label of the pesticide you have chosen?
Is the level of damage great enough to warrant spraying or will the problem take care of itself naturally?
Is the pest present and in a stage that will be killed by the pesticide at the time you are planning to spray?
Is this pesticide the most environmentally friendly choice for solving my problem?

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION, CONTACT YOUR EXTENSION OFFICE

By Ann Haldeman, Master Gardener, 1990