What’s Wrong With My Plant: Asparagus

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Adapted from University of Minnesota’s online identification tool, “What’s Wrong With My Plant,” written and managed by Michelle Grabowski and Jeff Hahn. Visit: https://z.umn.edu/42g4

Symptom: Rotting, crooked spear:
Likely cause: Phytophthora crown and spear rot

The spear is soft, slimy and curled over. There are dark water-soaked lesions at the soil line. Below the soil, the roots have water-soaked spots and the crown turns yellow. Prevention is key. Avoid overwatering, plant into phytophthora-free soil, and buy disease-free transplants.

Symptom: Crooked spear that looks otherwise healthy.
Likely cause: Asparagus beetle

Adults feeding on the spear cause it to crook over. They can also defoliate ferns. Larvae overwinter in the ferns. Remove ferns in late fall instead of spring. Harvest daily and cull infested spears. Hand remove beetles, or apply a product labeled for asparagus beetle.

Symptom: Small, purple, sunken ovals on spears or ferns
Likely cause: Purple Spot (*Stemphylium vesicarium*)

The purple spots grow larger, and form a darker purple border and a brown center. Severe infection of the fern can cause it to die back, reducing next year’s yield. It is common on exposed sandy sites, and potentially on no-till fields. It favors wet, cool weather, and windblown sand that causes wounds for the disease to enter. Remove infected ferns before the spring. Purchase hybrid varieties with better resistance. Further research is needed to determine the role of cover crops and mulch in creating windbreaks and reducing infection.
Symptom: Brown spots on lower fern, yellowing of the whole ferns.  
Likely cause: Cercospora leaf spot

Older plants in low lying areas, and drought-stressed plants, are most affected. Plants have yellow stunted shoots, with reddish brown lesions on lower stems and roots. Plants decline gradually. Improve airflow through the canopy by increasing plant and row spacing. Avoid afternoon overhead irrigation. Labeled fungicides may be needed to salvage plants in severe cases.

Symptom: Orange ovals and lesions on ferns, turning black in the fall.
Likely cause: Asparagus rust

The rust-colored spores rub off. No symptoms on spears. Infected foliage dies prematurely. It favors wet weather. Infected plants are more susceptible to other diseases. Plant resistant varieties, and increase spacing to improve airflow through the canopy. Severe outbreaks are uncommon but can require application of labeled fungicide products.

Symptom: Ferns yellowing, whole plant is stunted  
Likely cause: Fusarium root and crown rot

Stunted, yellow plants decline over time and do not produce well. Brown lesions form on the lower stems and roots. Stressed plants or those in low-lying areas are most susceptible. Prevention is key: Plant on well-drained sites with good air flow. Plant resistant varieties like Jersey Giant. Support plant vigor through proper soil fertility and weed control.