African Violet Leprosy?

By Joyce Stork

Leprosy might not be the perfect comparison, but at least it got your attention. Corynespora cassiicola (co-REEN-es-spora CASS-ee-eye-cola) is the official name of a fungal disease that has been identified in the United States for only the last forty years. It affects a wide variety of commercial plants including African violets, aeschynanthus, poinsettia, and hydrangea. Corynespora has been described by a paper reviewed by the USDA as “a devastating disease problem affecting African violet production,” primarily because there are few fungicidal controls to stop its progress.

No one wants to know Corynespora Leaf Spot personally, but it would be good for every African violet grower to recognize the threat this disease may pose to an African violet collection.

The disease initially causes sunken areas on the leaf. These areas develop into irregular brown lesions that advance rapidly causing leaves to collapse, especially in immature plants. Typically damage first occurs on the parts of the plant nearest the potting medium. It is spread by airborne spores, which may travel quickly over a wide area when the air moving. This is especially a concern in greenhouses that are vented, allowing breezes to stir up colonies of spores on discarded plant material. Spores have been observed to survive on plant debris for as much as two years. The fungus thrives in conditions with high moisture and humidity.

Very few chemical controls for the disease exist. One of the only products currently listed to treat Corynespora cassiicola effectively is iprodione (Chipco 26019). One internet supplier lists it currently at $110 for a two-pound container. The label recommends caution during application, by using protective clothing to prevent inhalation of the product or absorption through the skin. Since the disease can be devastating, and the chemical control is limited, the best choice is to avoid the disease with vigilance and a garbage can.

Leaf spot diseases are relatively rare in African violets. Recent social media posts have indicated some growers are hesitant to discard violets with brown spots on random leaves, mostly because they don’t recognize the danger. Any leaves with brown spots or fully collapsed leaves should be removed quickly from any plant growing area. Hands should be washed before contact with other plants. Should a plant exhibit additional symptoms within a short period of time, it is best to discard it, or at least isolate it away from healthy violets. This will prevent most serious problems.

In addition, growers should quickly dry leaves that have gotten wet. Dirty pots should be cleaned thoroughly before reuse. Old potting mix and any leaf debris should be discarded and quickly removed from the growing area. Spills should be wiped up. It’s just good housekeeping which will prevent other problems as well.

African violet leprosy otherwise known as Corynespora cassiicola is out there and it is serious. With good sanitation, it may never knock at the door of your African violet growing room.

2 Daughtrey, Margery L., Wick, Robert L., Peterson, Joseph L., 1995, Compendium of Flowering Potted Plant Diseases, APS Press, pg. 18