

PEACH LEAF CURL

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Peach leaf curl has been a common disease of peach trees this spring in Vermont. The disease often occurs in wet cool springs following mild winters. The fungus (*Taphrina deformans*) causes the foliage to become stunted, puckered, and deformed with a reddish to purple tinge, often causing alarm to gardeners. Blossoms, fruit, and shoots can also be infected and although the disease will not kill the tree, leaf drop can occur, and fruit production can be reduced. If leaf drop occurs early, the tree may produce a new set of leaves that show no damage. Plum pockets, a similar disease caused by a different *Taphrina* species, can be seen in plums, but the most obvious symptoms are distorted fruit. Another *Taphrina* species causes raised blisters on oak leaves in cool wet springs following mild winters.



Puckered distorted leaves caused by the peach leaf curl fungus. Cathie Creed



Close up of peach leaf curl disease showing thickened distorted pinkish leaves. Cathie Creed

The fungus overwinters in the bark and bud scales of its hosts. While still in the bud, the fungus infects leaves and shoots just as they begin to emerge, and foliage symptoms appear about 2 weeks later if temperatures are mild (50-70°F), and the weather is wet.

As the fungus grows between the cells in the leaf, it stimulates the cells to divide and expand causing the leaf to swell and pucker. The pinkish colors are caused by plant pigments that

accumulate in the distorted cells. The fungus produces a fruiting body (like a mushroom only much smaller) that releases spores that are carried to new tissue. The fungus does not infect mature leaves or fruit and remains dormant during the summer.

The disease will not kill the tree but can make it more susceptible to other stresses such as drought or winter injury. Keep up the vigor of the tree by proper pruning to let in air and light and water during times of drought. Thinning the fruit can also help reduce stress to the tree and helps increase the size of the remaining fruit. There are resistant or tolerant peach varieties (e.g., 'Frost', 'Muir', 'Indian Free') but these may not be winter hardy enough for Vermont conditions. A fungicide application before the buds swell in the spring will control the disease in commercial orchards but is rarely warranted for backyard trees.

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