

Massachusetts Master Gardener Association

FACT SHEET



Have Gardening Questions? The **Master Gardener Help Line Hours** are 10 a.m. – 2 p.m. on Fridays (all year) as well as Wednesdays (March-November) and Mondays (April-October).
Phone: 617-933-4929 Email: mghelpline@masshort.org.

What Happened to My Impatiens Last Summer?

Many gardeners in the Northeast have experienced an unusual failure of one of their favorite shade annuals: *Impatiens walleriana*. Until recently impatiens have been the most reliable and colorful plants for our shady beds, but they are now being threatened by a disease called “impatiens downy mildew.”

Vegetable gardeners may remember having their tomato crops wiped out early in the season a few years ago by late blight. Impatiens downy mildew (IDM) is caused by a closely related fungus-like organism that thrives in damp and cool conditions.

The new scourge actually has been a problem in Europe for a few years, to the degree that many seedsmen and nurserymen there have stopped growing and selling *Impatiens walleriana* for the time being. IDM appeared in North America in a few scattered places in 2011, but this past year broke into a widespread problem.

Despite its name, downy mildew is not related to the powdery mildews seen on lilacs, phlox, and summer squash. Powdery mildews thrive in humidity alone, while the spores created by water molds like IDM need actual water on their host plant and do not survive long without that water. Under the right conditions, they may survive long enough to be spread by the wind. Excessive rain and overhead irrigation encourage IDM.

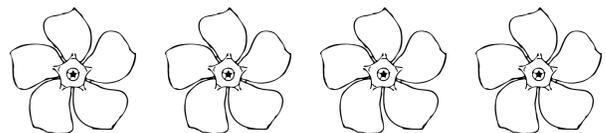
Unfortunately, IDM, late blight, and other water molds also create a second type of spore. These resting spores are released as the infected plant material decomposes and can remain viable in the soil through the winter. This means that if infected plants were growing in a particular spot one year, that spot is contaminated and healthy impatiens planted there the following year are likely to get infected, dwindle, and finally die. IDM shows up first as white spores on the undersides of the

leaves, so check the leaves to make a certain diagnosis.

There is no cure for IDM. It can be controlled in commercial greenhouses through a rigorous preventive program of fungicide applications. Home gardeners will not (and should not) go this route. In the spring, consumers may see healthy-looking impatiens in the garden centers as usual, but if they are placed in a landscape where IDM has been present, infection, decline, and premature death are almost inevitable. The best advice is to forego the busy lizzies for a year or two, hope the spores have all died, and try again if you're so inclined. Practice good garden sanitation and put all infected material in the trash. Do not compost it. IDM could be a long-term problem, though, and we may have seen the last of impatiens as our go-to, all-purpose shade flower.

Most shaded beds have a foundation of perennials, woody plants, and/or ground covers, and blooming annuals are included to add an extra bit of color. Some possible substitutes for impatiens are listed below. Many plants tolerate shade, but they will bloom less than if they had more light. Put in mature plants, not seedlings. Look for plants such as coleus that have showy leaves rather than blossoms. Also consider adding pots and other colorful hardscape or sculpture to the shadiest beds.

Shade-tolerant alternatives to *Impatiens walleriana* include begonia, browallia, New Guinea impatiens, pansies and violas, nicotiana, mimulus, hypoestes (polka-dot plant), coleus, fuchsia, caladiums, colocasia, torenia, lobelia, and achimenes.



The Massachusetts Master Gardener Association is a non-profit organization whose mission is to share knowledge and experience with the public through outreach programs in education, horticulture and gardening; to provide the Master Gardener Training Program to interested members of the public; and to provide graduates of the Master Gardener Training Program with educational and practical opportunities to extend their knowledge and interests in gardening and related topics. <http://www.massmastergardeners.org/>