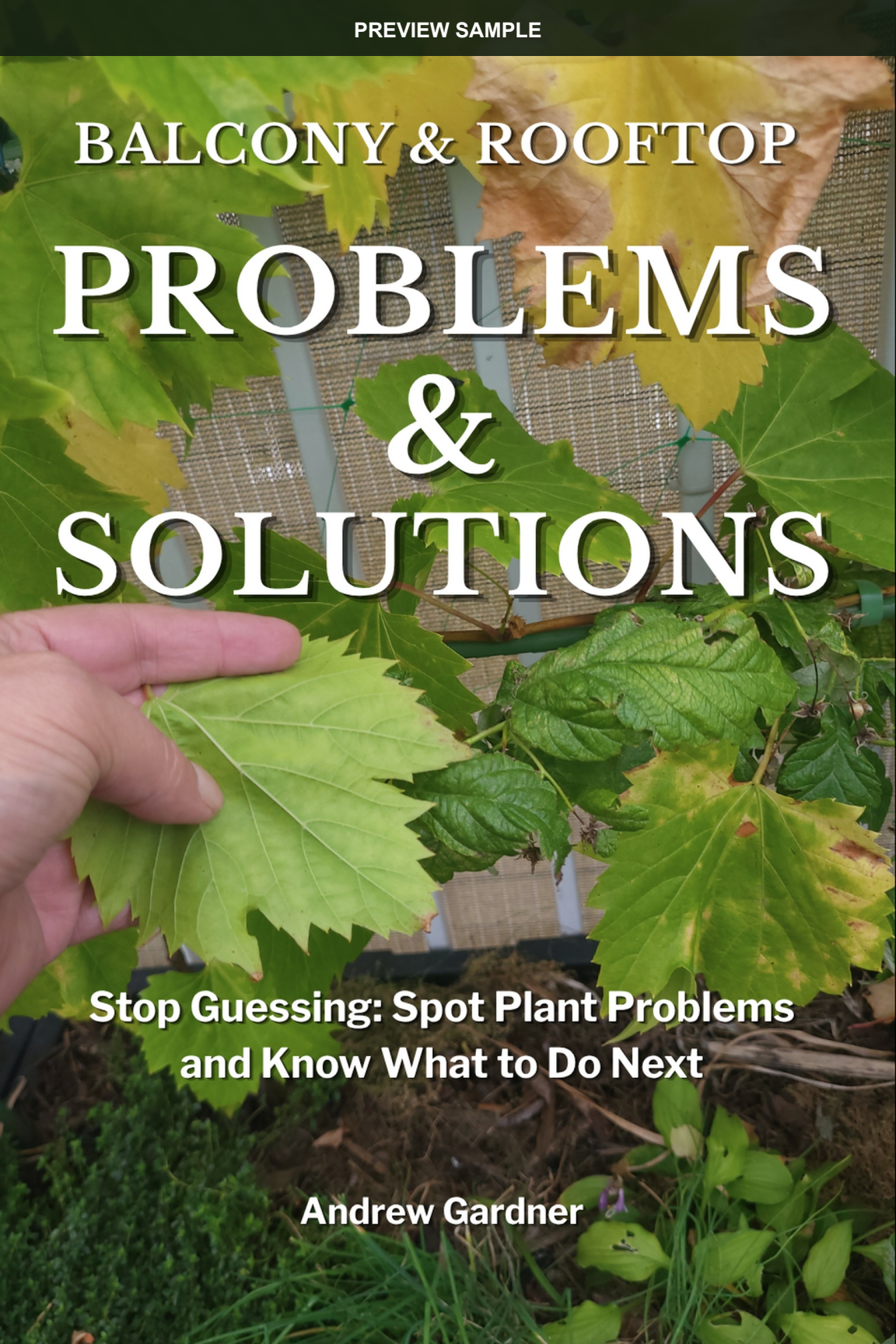




BALCONY & ROOFTOP PROBLEMS & SOLUTIONS

**Stop Guessing: Spot Plant Problems
and Know What to Do Next**

Andrew Gardner

Balcony & Rooftop Gardening

Problems & Solutions

**Stop Guessing: Spot Plant Problems
and Know What to Do Next**

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Balcony & Rooftop Gardening: Problems & Solutions

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This book provides general gardening information. Plant symptoms can have several causes, and advice should be applied to the plant, growing conditions and local requirements. Where the cause is uncertain or a problem persists, seek advice from a qualified local specialist.

Always follow product labels and equipment instructions. Obtain appropriate professional advice before altering structural fixtures or placing heavy containers on balconies or rooftops.

References to organisations and external resources do not imply their endorsement of this book. Website content and availability may change.

gardenabovethecity.com

A Note from the Author

A garden can leave you with more questions than answers. Why are the leaves turning yellow? Why does a plant wilt when the mix is still wet? Why do flowers open, yet produce no fruit?

Growing plants on my rooftop terrace has given me plenty of reasons to ask those questions. I have dealt with pests, prolonged rain, wind damage and plants whose needs did not fit the containers they shared. Some experiences led me to change how I cared for a plant. Others led me to change what I grew.

One lesson runs through this book: before doing more, look more closely. Another watering, feed or spray may feel like progress, but it helps only when it addresses the problem.

I wrote Problems & Solutions to help you make that next decision. You can begin with the symptom in front of you, check the conditions that matter and choose an action suited to what you find. Then you can look again and judge whether it helped.

Throughout the book, I share experiences from my own garden. They are observations from particular plants and seasons, alongside guidance drawn from horticultural sources. I hope they make the decisions easier to understand and the setbacks feel less unfamiliar.

You do not need a perfect garden to enjoy growing. You need a way to learn from what happens and decide what to try next.

Andrew Gardner

How to Use This Book

Start with what you see

You do not need to know the cause before opening this book. If you are unsure where to begin, Chapters I-III help you review what changed, distinguish normal changes from problems, and inspect your plant.

Find your route

Use Chapter IV, Find Your Symptom, to locate the closest match. You can also start with Chapter XXII, Plant-by-Plant Troubleshooting. References such as V: 2 mean Chapter V, card 2 - not page 2.

Check before acting

Each diagnostic card explains what to check, possible causes, the first action, what to avoid and how to assess progress. Read the checks before choosing an action: similar symptoms can have different causes.

Watch what happens next

Keep a brief note or photograph of the problem and any action taken. Look for fresh damage and healthy new growth; old holes and dead patches will remain. Use If It Does Not Improve when the response is disappointing.

Keep the next step practical

Chapter XXI helps you prepare care during an absence. Chapter XXIII guides a regular plant check, while Chapter XXIV helps you weigh continued care against replacement.

Use the series when you need more detail

Balcony & Rooftop Gardening for Beginners covers the foundations and practical methods. What to Grow explains plant requirements. This book helps you investigate problems, choose your next action and judge whether it helped.

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Got a Plant Problem?

Your Shortcut to the Next Step

Before you reach for the watering can, fertiliser or spray, take a moment to check what your plant needs.

Is it really a problem?

Older leaves, seasonal colour changes and dormancy can be normal. If you are unsure, begin with Chapter II.

Thinking of watering?

Check moisture below the surface and whether excess water can escape. Wilting does not always mean thirst.

Start with Chapter III; use Chapter V for wilting or Chapter IX for problems in the pot.

Thinking of feeding?

Yellow leaves or slow growth do not automatically mean a nutrient shortage. Check growing conditions and root-zone moisture before adding fertiliser.

Use Chapter VI for yellowing or Chapter VIII for slow growth.

Thinking of spraying?

Look for evidence of an active pest or disease. Old holes, sticky deposits or leaf spots alone do not tell you what treatment is needed.

Use Chapters X-XI for pests and Chapter XII for spots, powder or mould.

Need another route?

Find the closest symptom in Chapter IV, or look up your plant in Chapter XXII. Read the full card's checks before choosing an action.

Have you already taken action?

Note what you changed and watch for fresh damage or signs of sustained improvement. Follow the card's What to Watch For and If It Does Not Improve sections.

Observe. Check. Act. Check again.

How Your Plant Works

When leaves change colour or a plant stops growing, the cause may be somewhere you cannot see. Leaves, stems and roots depend on one another. A problem in the pot can show up in the foliage, and damage to the foliage can affect growth below it.

Leaves use light energy to make sugars from water and carbon dioxide from the air. This is photosynthesis. The sugars provide energy and material for growth. They travel to parts of the plant that need them, including roots, young shoots, flowers and developing fruit.

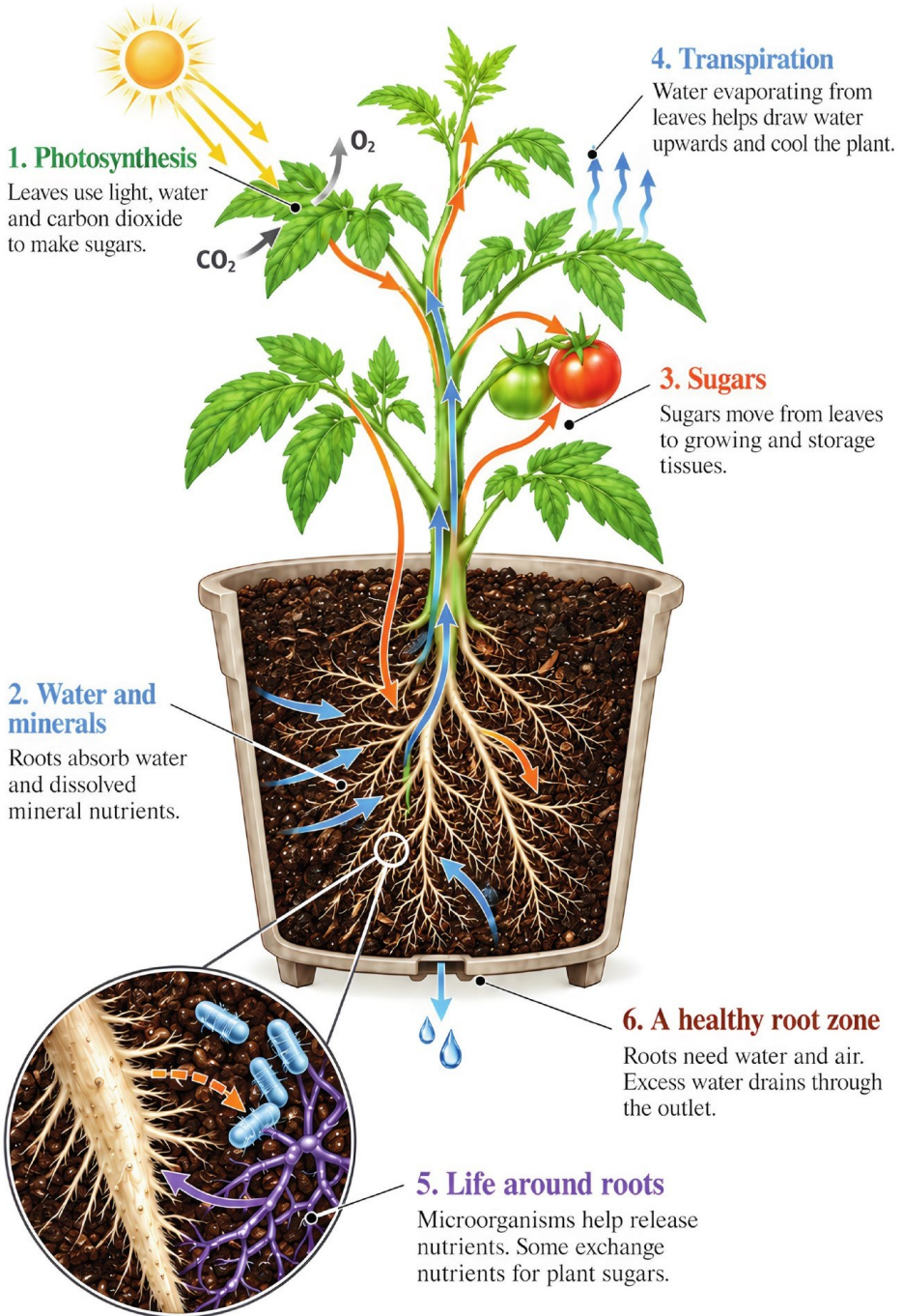
Fertiliser supplies mineral nutrients, such as nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium. These help the plant build and maintain its tissues, but they do not replace the sugars it makes. Adding more fertiliser cannot make up for too little light. Roots take up water and available mineral nutrients from the growing medium. They also use oxygen to release energy from sugars through respiration. This is why the spaces around roots must contain air as well as water.

Water moves through the plant to the leaves. As water evaporates from them, it helps draw more water upwards from the roots. This process, called transpiration, also helps cool the leaves. If water loss exceeds what the roots can supply, the plant may wilt.

Around the roots, microorganisms help break down organic matter and cycle nutrients. Some form beneficial partnerships with the plant. Their contribution matters, alongside moisture, air and suitable chemical conditions in the growing medium.

Understanding these connections will help you follow the decisions in this book: when to water, when feeding may help, and when the plant first needs better conditions around its roots or leaves.

How Your Plant Works



Simplified diagram. Microorganisms shown enlarged.

Chapter I

Start Here: What Has Changed?

Yesterday, your tomato looked fine. Today, its leaves are hanging down.

You reach for the watering can, then remember: you watered it this morning.

Should you water again? Move it into shade? Feed it?

Start with a different question: what has changed?

Look back before you add anything

Think about when you first noticed the problem and when the plant last looked healthy. A photograph on your phone may help.

Then consider these five questions:

- **Is the plant new here?** Has it recently arrived from a nursery, moved outdoors or been repotted?
- **Has its position changed?** Is it receiving stronger sun, more wind or less shelter? Has another plant grown large enough to shade it?
- **Has its water supply changed?** Was watering missed, increased or handed over to someone else? Did you change an irrigation setting?
- **Have you applied anything?** Note the fertiliser or spray, the amount used and whether you followed the label.
- **Has the weather changed?** Think about heat, drying wind, prolonged rain or a cold spell.

Look beyond yesterday. Some problems become visible gradually, so include changes from the previous few weeks. You do not need a gardening diary to begin. “Repotted recently; windy since then; leaves drooped this afternoon” is already useful information.

Check what happened at the pot

Above the city, the weather forecast tells only part of the story. Rain may wet the railing while missing a pot beneath the balcony above. A sheltered corner and an exposed railing box can behave very differently on the same day. A plant beside a sunny wall may experience conditions that another plant a few steps away does not.

When this book uses “potting mix,” it means the growing medium in your container. In the UK, you may see it labelled “potting compost” or “container compost.” It is not the same thing as homemade garden compost.

Notice who else is affected

Did several plants begin showing changes after the same event, or did the problem appear in only one? Include this in the record below. Chapter III will help you examine the pattern of damage more closely.

Keep a short record

Before adding feed or applying a spray, take a photograph of the whole plant and a close-up of the symptom. Write down:

Plant:

What I can see:

When I first noticed it:

What changed beforehand:

What I have already done:

Record what you observed. “Leaves drooping; mix still damp” is more useful than “Needs more water.”

A recent change does not automatically explain the problem. It gives you something to investigate. Avoid adding several unrelated treatments while you are still working out what happened.

This quick review is not a reason to delay help for a plant that is collapsing or has a broken stem. Go straight to the relevant symptom card and follow its first checks.

If nothing obvious has changed, that is useful information too. The next chapter will help you decide whether what you see is a problem at all. Chapter III will guide you through examining the plant and its container.

Andrew's Experience

On my rooftop terrace in Gdynia, alpine strawberries in 15 L / 4 US gal railing boxes dried much faster than plants in my large containers standing on the terrace floor. During warm or windy weather, I checked the boxes daily.

But prolonged rain also brought root rot and plant losses in those boxes. Bark beneath the fruit helped keep the berries off the damp surface; it did not solve saturated conditions around the roots.

The boxes had not changed. The weather had. A watering routine that suited one set of conditions could not be my answer to every problem.

Chapter II

Is It a Problem - or Normal Plant Behaviour?

A yellow leaf catches your eye. A pot that was full of leaves now looks empty. Your lettuce has started growing upwards instead of filling out.

Has something gone wrong?

Perhaps. But before you try to restore the plant to the way it looked before, check whether it has simply reached a different stage.

Plants replace leaves, rest, flower and finish their life cycles. Knowing which change belongs to your plant can save you an unnecessary treatment - or help you notice when something really needs attention.

One old leaf is not the whole plant

Leaves do not last forever. A few older leaves may yellow and fall while the rest of the plant remains healthy.

That explanation is more plausible when the change is limited to older foliage, the remaining leaves look normal and new growth is healthy when the plant is actively growing. It is less reassuring when yellowing spreads quickly, young leaves are affected or the plant also wilts.

Do not decide from colour alone. Older leaves can also show problems with water, roots or nutrients.

For a small, limited change with no other warning signs, take a photograph and check again over the following days. If more leaves become affected, use *The Leaves Are Turning Yellow* rather than assuming the plant is merely getting older.

An empty-looking pot may still hold a living plant

In climates with a cold season, hostas and herbs such as chives and lovage can lose their above-ground growth and return when suitable growing conditions arrive. Deciduous fruit bushes and trees shed their leaves too.

This resting period is called **dormancy**.

A hosta fading as its growing season ends is different from a hosta collapsing while its neighbours are still growing strongly. The plant's identity, the timing and the pattern matter.

Check the relevant profile in What to Grow. Does this plant normally lose its leaves or disappear above the surface in your climate? If so, keep its label in place and do not empty the pot simply because it looks bare.

Dormancy does not make container care unnecessary. Continue checking moisture and drainage; do not assume rain reaches a sheltered pot, or that a resting plant needs the same watering as one covered in leaves. Do not add extra fertiliser just to force a dormant plant into growth.

If there is soft, rotting tissue or an unexpected collapse, investigate. "It must be resting" is not a diagnosis.

Flowering can change the purpose of a crop

A lettuce sending up a tall flower stalk is moving towards reproduction. Gardeners call this bolting. It is a natural process, although heat and other conditions can make it happen earlier than you want.

Natural does not mean useful for your harvest.

If you want tender salad leaves, a flowering lettuce may no longer meet that aim. Feeding it will not turn its flower stalk back into a leafy head. Use Bolting, Bitterness and Disappointing Harvests to decide what to do with this crop and how to improve the next one.

Likewise, an annual plant cannot be expected to remain productive indefinitely. But do not label sudden decline “the end of its life” merely because it has already produced some flowers or fruit. Check the symptoms first.

Know the plant’s usual appearance

Not every healthy leaf is plain green. Hostas may naturally have yellow, blue-green or cream-marked foliage. Heuchera cultivars can have red, bronze or purple leaves.

Compare with the same cultivar, not simply another plant of the same general kind. A label or an earlier photograph is more useful than an unfamiliar image online.

A normal colour pattern is different from a new change. Fresh brown patches, distorted growth or colour loss that spreads still deserve checking.

Decide whether to watch or investigate

If the change fits the plant’s normal behaviour and there are no additional warning signs, continue appropriate care and observation.

Otherwise, or if you are unsure, use the plant check in Chapter III. Rapid collapse deserves prompt attention through the relevant symptom card.

Andrew’s Experience

My container-grown lovage dies back completely in winter and regrows in spring. I have grown it from seed and normally harvest individual shoots for fresh use or drying.

On one occasion, I left a shoot uncut to see what it would do. It reached about 1.5 m / 5 ft and began flowering. I cut it before seed formed, and the plant produced several replacement shoots and became bushier.

The winter disappearance and the tall flowering shoot were different stages of the same plant. Neither observation, on its own, meant that the lovage was sick.

My blueberries offer another example. Their leaves turn red in autumn before falling, but I have also seen red leaves during the growing season. The same colour needs a different explanation depending on when it appears.

After a spell of cold days and chilly nights, reddening can be a response to low temperatures. Cold conditions can temporarily limit phosphorus uptake; that does not necessarily mean the potting mix lacks phosphorus.

If temperatures have been normal for the season, I would not dismiss the change as autumn colour. But red leaves alone still cannot identify a nutrient deficiency. Phosphorus shortage can produce dark-green to reddish-purple leaves, often with weak growth and small leaves. Iron deficiency more typically causes yellowing between green veins, especially on young leaves.

Before adding a supplement, check moisture, drainage, the potting mix's pH and the feeding history. Blueberries need an acidic growing medium. If the pH is too high, they can struggle to obtain nutrients even when those nutrients are present.

Reddening during active growth is therefore a reason to check pH, not proof that it is too high. Root problems and unsuitable moisture conditions can also interfere with nutrient uptake.

Persistent reddening, poor growth or other symptoms deserve a closer investigation; an adviser may recommend testing the growing medium or leaves.

Autumn colour is expected. Red leaves during active growth are a clue to investigate, not an instruction to add phosphorus or iron.



Blueberry leaves turning red in autumn - a natural seasonal change.
Photo: Andrew Gardner



Blueberries still on the plant as the leaves develop their autumn colours.
Photo: Andrew Gardner



Hydrangea flowers fading and leaves changing colour towards the end of the season. Photo: Andrew Gardner



A fading hydrangea flower head - a natural stage after flowering. Photo: Andrew Gardner

Chapter III

Your First Plant Check

A wilted leaf catches your attention. The clue you need may be somewhere else: beneath the leaf, beside a tight plant tie, or inside the pot.

Before choosing a remedy, look at the whole plant and its container. This check helps you collect useful clues without turning every unhappy plant into a repotting project. Take your phone and, if you have one, a magnifying glass. Start with what you can see. Leave the roots until last.

Quick Check

Check	What to look for
Whole plant and position	One affected shoot or the whole plant? Exposed or sheltered side?
Leaves, including undersides	Which leaves changed first? Pests, fine mite webbing, sticky patches, holes or notched edges?
Young shoots, stems and base	Aphid colonies on soft growth and buds; breaks, rubbing, tight ties or soft, collapsing tissue.
Potting mix	Dry or wet below the surface? Similar moisture in different places? Small flies or larvae near the surface?
Drainage	Trapped water, blocked outlets or a problem with the overflow.
Roots, if needed	A crowded root ball, decay, chewed roots or larvae in the mix, including vine weevil grubs.

1. Step Back Before You Lean In

Use the history recorded in Chapter I, then look at where the damage occurs.

Is the whole plant drooping, or just one branch? Are the worst leaves on the side facing afternoon sun? Does damage follow the edge exposed to wind?

Compare nearby plants, especially others of the same kind. Note whether the damage follows a similar pattern or is confined to one plant and its pot. These observations help direct the next check; they do not prove a cause.

2. Turn the Leaves Over

Examine an affected leaf and a healthy-looking one. Check older leaves, young leaves and the growing tips.

Note where the change begins: at the edge, between the veins, in separate spots or across the whole leaf. Look underneath and along the leaf stalks for insects, fine webbing, eggs and sticky deposits.

A phone camera can help you enlarge something too small to see clearly. Photograph it before wiping or removing it.

Use a magnifying glass to look for tiny moving dots beneath speckled leaves. For suspected spider mites, use XI: 2; an ordinary spider's web alone is not evidence of them.

For holes, use Chapter X; for notched edges, use X: 4. Notches alone do not prove that root-feeding larvae are present in the pot.

Finding an insect does not automatically identify the culprit. Some insects feed on plants; others eat those pests. Keep identification separate from treatment.

3. Follow the Stems Down

Check the route between the damaged leaves and the base of the plant.

Inspect tender shoot tips, flower buds and young leaf undersides for insect colonies and sticky deposits. Gently open curled leaves without tearing them. For suspected aphids, use XI: 1.

Look for a snapped shoot, a stem rubbing against a railing, or a tie pressing into new growth. These clues are especially useful when only one branch is failing.

At the surface of the mix, look for unusual darkening, soft tissue or a collapsing stem. Move loose fallen leaves aside gently so you can see the base.

Do not scrape bark, cut healthy stems or dig around the base simply to investigate. Record what is visible first.

4. Check Below the Surface

A dry surface does not tell you whether the whole pot needs water.

Move loose mulch aside. Where accessible, feel the mix about 3-5 cm / 1-2 in below the surface. This is a first check, not a reading of the entire root zone.

In a large container, check more than one accessible position without forcing your finger through roots. Deeper mix may remain wet while the top dries.

For a recently planted specimen, consider the original nursery root ball as well as the surrounding mix. They can hold moisture differently.

Also notice what happens during normal watering. Water running straight out can mean it has found a shortcut around dry mix or a crowded root ball. Runoff alone does not prove that the roots received enough water.

Write down what you find. Do not add water just because the leaves droop.

Note small flies on or near the mix and whether seedlings or cuttings are declining; use XI: 6 for identification and next steps. Flies alone do not explain decline. Do not dig up a healthy plant just because a few appear.

5. Check Where the Water Goes

Look for standing water in a saucer or decorative outer pot. Check any accessible drainage outlets for obstruction.

Do not pour more water into already wet mix merely to test the drainage. Do not lift or tip a heavy terrace tub for this check.

A self-watering container needs a different approach. Water in its reservoir is expected. Check the level, overflow and watering instructions for that particular design. A full reservoir does not, by itself, prove that water is reaching the roots.

Gravel added to the bottom is not a cure for waterlogged mix. The next step depends on whether the problem is trapped water, unsuitable mix, damaged roots or a fault in the watering system.

6. Decide Whether the Roots Need a Look

Inspect roots when a plant keeps wilting despite moist mix, declines in persistently wet conditions, or becomes difficult to water properly.

Suspected root-feeding pests also warrant investigation. Wilting despite moist mix is a reason to check roots, not automatically add water.

A few roots at a drainage hole do not justify emergency repotting.

For a manageable single-plant pot, gently slide out the root ball only if it releases easily. Support it; never pull by the stem. Keep the mix around the roots; do not wash them bare.

Look for dense, circling roots and unusually soft, mushy or easily broken roots. Healthy roots are generally firm, but colour varies with species and age. Brown does not automatically mean rotten.

Root decay has multiple causes. Appearance alone cannot identify a disease or establish that disease caused the damage. During a justified inspection, photograph larvae and feeding damage in exposed mix between roots. For suspected vine weevil grubs, use X: 4; not every pale larva is a vine weevil. In a large tub or shared planting, avoid disturbing neighbouring roots unnecessarily. Use other checks first. If decline continues and the cause remains unclear, ask a local plant adviser or diagnostic service what evidence they need.

Finish with a Useful Record

Add the inspection findings to your record from Chapter I: where the damage occurs, what you found beneath the leaves and along the stems, and the moisture and drainage conditions. Include root findings only if inspection was justified. Keep your original photographs and add a close-up or underside view if it records something new. Choose the symptom card that best matches these findings. Follow its first action only when the required check supports it. After acting, compare the same areas and note any fresh damage or new growth; an old damaged leaf may remain damaged during recovery.

Andrew's Experience

On my rooftop terrace, hostas grow in shared containers of 80 L / 21 US gal. Taller plants and railing screens create patches of shade, although some hostas still receive direct sun. During extreme heat, a few leaves developed minor scorch. Slugs also appeared on the terrace and chewed holes in the leaves.

Both changed the appearance of the foliage, but they called for different responses. Growing above the city did not keep slugs away, and a generally sunny terrace did not give every hosta the same exposure.



Turn the leaf over to inspect its underside during your first plant check.
Photo: Andrew Gardner



Move the mulch aside and check the potting mix with your finger.
Photo: Andrew Gardner



Assess how damp the potting mix feels before deciding whether to water.
Photo: Andrew Gardner

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