

Brown Leaves on a White Jasmine Vine

By Susan Camp

Readers often ask me where I find the topics for this column. Sometimes I find ideas on internet gardening or nursery sites. Some topics arise from the seasons or holidays; some are related to successes or gardening problems Jim and I are facing at home. The most challenging topics arise from questions asked by friends and readers about specific plants.

A few weeks ago, my friend Julie from Mathews told me about the white jasmine vine that has graced the wall of her outdoor shower for 20 years. This winter, the leaves have all turned brown, and Julie wanted to know if she could prune it now. The short answer was “No”, but more about that, later. First, a little about jasmines.

The 200 to 300 true jasmines (*Jasminum* spp.) are members of the olive family, and are evergreen, semi-evergreen, or deciduous vines or shrubs. Many, but not all species, produce flowers that are sweetly fragrant. Some plants that are called jasmine, actually belong to a different genus. Yellow Confederate jasmine is properly called *Trachelospermum jasminoides*; Carolina jessamine is *Gelsemium sempervirens*; and cape jessamine (*Gardenia jasminoides*) is a member of the *Gardenia* genus. All are popular garden vines and produce headily fragrant yellow or white blossoms in summer.

Common white or poet’s jasmine (*Jasminum officinale*) is native to China, the Himalayas, and Asia Minor. It is winter hardy in USDA Zones 7 through 10. A semi-evergreen to deciduous vine or semi-vining shrub with a growth rate of 12 to 24 inches per year, common white jasmine can be grown in the garden or outdoors or indoors in a container. Container-grown jasmine should be brought inside for the winter in Zone 7.

All jasmines need full sun to partial shade and a warm site in moderately fertile, well-drained garden soil. They must be watered weekly in summer. Common white jasmine is drought and pollution tolerant.

When grown as a shrub, common white jasmine can reach a length of 15 to 20 feet, and requires frequent, minor pruning and shaping to keep it under control. Grown as a vine, white jasmine needs a wall or trellis for support, as it can grow to 20 to 30 feet in length with a spread of 7 to 15 feet. The downy, green leaves have five to nine leaflets apiece. White or pale pink flowers bloom from June through September. The intensely sweet fragrance will perfume a patio or deck. The blossoms attract bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds. Common white jasmine blooms on new growth, and should be pruned heavily after flowering.

Few insect pests and diseases attack white jasmine. Armored and soft scales can cause leaves to turn yellow and drop prematurely. The leaves that remain on the vine will turn brownish and scorched-looking. Soft scale insects secrete sweet honeydew, which provides a growing medium for sooty mold. Wingless, soft-bodied mealybugs can infest white jasmine; they also produce honeydew. Insect infestation is more likely to occur in warm, humid weather.

Iron or nitrogen deficiency can cause discoloration, distortion, or foliage necrosis, leading to stunting and death of the entire plant. Nutritional deficiency usually is caused by the plant's inability to access the minerals because of diseased roots, waterlogged soil, or nematodes. A soil test will identify insufficient minerals.

I haven't had the opportunity to look at Julie's white jasmine vine, but I suspect the extremely cold winter is the primary cause of the brown leaves. Low temperatures and harsh winds stress outdoor plants.

When the weather warms up for a few days, we are tempted to start pruning our vines and shrubs. Don't do it yet. Wait a few more weeks. We are likely to have more cold weather throughout February. Winter dieback occurs on the tips of branches after several days of low temperatures. If you prune during a warm spell, and temperatures fall into the teens again, winter dieback will occur on the newly pruned tips, and buds will be destroyed.

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