

PLANT HEALTH CARE REPORT



Japanese Privet

Japanese privet (*Ligustrum japonicum*) is an evergreen shrub or small tree widely used as a hedge, screen, or ornamental. Privet establishes quickly and grows rapidly. It can be pruned to form a hedge or topiary in just a few years. This species tolerates a wide range of soil conditions and is relatively drought tolerant.

Privet has the reputation for being easy to grow. However, since it can reproduce from seed, it has the potential to escape cultivation. Once it escapes, it is considered an invasive species because it crowds out native vegetation. The dark purple fruit can also become a messy nuisance, especially in plants that are not sheared.

Japanese privet grows best in plant hardiness zones 7 through 10 where temperatures rarely drop below 0°F. It can be damaged by low temperatures, especially when planted in exposed coastal locations. Shearing in late summer and high levels of parasitic nematodes can predispose privet to winter injury.

The optimum pH range for privet is 5.5 to 7.5. If the pH is lower than 5.5, some minerals build to toxic levels and macronutrients, such as phosphorus, cannot be absorbed. Japanese privet is considered only marginally salt tolerant and is sensitive to salt spray.



Ligustrum japonicum in flower
Photo courtesy of Jim Robbins



Applying a growth regulator after shearing can increase drought resistance and time between shearing

Repeated shearing of privet can lead to shading-out of interior portions of the crown, leaving a thin “shell” of foliage to support the plant. This contributes to decline, especially in older plants. One way to correct this problem is to remove or reduce $\frac{1}{3}$ of the older stems to ground level in early spring before new growth begins. Referred to as rejuvenation pruning, this 3-year process encourages growth of new stems and interior foliage.

Although privet is a drought-tolerant species, it thrives when irrigated during periods of low rainfall. If needed, apply drip irrigation to the root zone to a depth of 12 inches once each week. Avoid frequent, light irrigation because it leads to surface rooting and winter injury.

While Japanese privet was once considered “problem free,” many shrubs have begun to decline due to a combination of stressors, such as acidic soil, over-shearing, and pest outbreaks, coupled with adverse weather conditions.

Major diseases and pests are listed below.

1. Root diseases: Most damaging in sandy soils, root knot nematodes (parasitic microscopic worms) insert a stylet into the cells of fine feeder roots, removing sap and causing cells to form round galls. Heavy infestations of nematodes can inhibit root growth and water and nutrient absorption, resulting in decline. Irrigation during dry periods, mulching, and incorporating ground-up pine bark into the soil may reduce nematode populations. Japanese privet is also susceptible to *Verticillium* wilt, a disease that infects through the roots.

Monitoring and Treatment Considerations for Japanese Privet

Late winter

Apply dormant treatment to suppress rust mites and scale. Expose and inspect root collar for problems; add mulch as needed. Remove winter-damaged branches and shear or rejuvenate as needed. Sample soil for nutrient and pH levels.

Early spring

Monitor for rust mites; treat as needed. Fertilize, adjust pH, and amend soil according to soil analysis.

Mid-spring

Monitor for rust mites and scale crawlers; treat as needed. If nematode damage is suspected, submit soil sample for nematode analysis.

Late spring

Monitor for scale crawlers; treat as needed. Monitor irrigation and soil moisture to minimize water stress and prevent root disease. Shear hedges to maintain height and form.

Mid to late summer

Monitor for scale crawlers; treat as needed. Expose and inspect root collar for problems. Add mulch as necessary. Monitor irrigation and soil moisture to minimize water stress and prevent root disease. Avoid shearing.

2. White prunicola scale: This insect infests a wide range of hosts and can develop quickly to damaging levels on Japanese privet. Adults, which can completely cover the stems imparting a white appearance to the bark, insert a stylet into the phloem and remove sap. Two to three generations can occur each year.

3. Privet rust mite: This tiny eriophyid mite feeds on developing foliage in early spring causing distortion and bronzing of the affected leaves. Heavy infestations can lead to premature defoliation in summer. Thrips and whiteflies will also feed on the foliage and cause similar discoloration.

Fall

Fertilize, adjust pH, and amend soil according to soil analysis. Monitor irrigation and soil moisture to minimize winter injury. Shear to maintain form when the plant is dormant.
