Brighton & Hove City Council

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Arboricultural Information Note No. 14

Tar Spot Fungus
Rhytisma acerinum

Tar spot is an unmistakable and conspicuous fungus of little importance as a tree disease. The principal hosts of this fungus are Sycamores and Maples (Acer species).

The fungus overwinters on fallen leaves with fresh spores being produced during the following spring. The spores, when released, have a sticky coating and attach themselves to newly forming leaves, causing striking and visually obvious raised shiny spots on the infected leaves.

Early in the year these fruiting bodies may appear as yellowish spots, later turning black and remaining until autumn's leaf fall, the characteristic black reflecting the popular common name.

Leaves often support several Tar Spots, each generally around 1.5cm in diameter. On close inspection, these appear ridged while on the reverse side of the leaves the corresponding section of each leaf directly below the Tar Spot is cupped.

Fortunately, while somewhat unsightly, the fungus does not cause any lasting or serious harm to established trees, although its presence may be associated with some early leaf fall.

The disease is rare in towns and cities, a fact often attributed to the fungicidal action of air pollutants, especially sulphur dioxide. However, there is evidence that this may in fact be more attributable to the fact that streets are swept of leaves throughout the winter period and this action deprives the fungus of vital host material on which to overwinter, thus breaking the life cycle.

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