Controlling Apple & Pear Scab

By Gary Ingram

Apple and pear scab are two different diseases that look similar and are controlled with the same chemicals, and develop in trees during wet springs. I know we are still officially in winter, but my trees believe it is spring, and it is wet!

This picture is from WSU of an apple spur that is classified as “1/2 inch green tip” – the proper time to apply fixed copper for scab management.

Now is the time to start your spraying program on apple and pear trees that get scab.

My Liberty apple tree is considered a variety that is scab resistance, but one year I did develop scab. My problem was that the tree was too dense, which didn’t allow good air circulation. That winter I removed 25% of the tree and have not had a problem since then. Good air flow and lots of sunlight really helps.

Some trees will get scab no matter what you do. On my European pear trees, I always have scab. By spraying them three times each spring with Lime sulfur I have been able to control 80% or more of the scab. This same spray on my apple trees have resulted in nearly 100% control.

Lime sulfur is a combination of hydrated lime and sulfur. This combination is effective against both insect pests and plant fungal diseases. The combination has been used for more than 100 years and is considered the most commonly applied organic fungicide in organic farming situations. The EPA has now banned Lime Sulfur for people without a pesticide license, and stores are only allowed to sell what is on their shelves.

I don’t have the information on why they have banned this chemical, but my guess is because it is so dangerous. All chemicals must print on their labels what is called “Signal Word”, i.e., Danger, Warning or Caution. Caution is the least toxic, considered either “slightly toxic” or “relatively non-toxic”. Warning is “Moderately toxic” and Danger is “Highly toxic”. Lime Sulfur’s signal word is Danger. The copper fungicides that we are told to use in place of sulfur products are rated at Caution. If copper works, just the fact that it is nowhere as dangerous as lime sulfur is a great reason to use it.

WSU considers Copper the best way to control fungal and bacterial diseases on foliage. While the National Organic Standards Board classifies them as synthetic products, they are allowed in organic agriculture with restrictions. Both Bayview Farm & Garden and Peaceful Valley Farm Supply (an organic farming supply company) sell Liqui-Cop, a Copper based fungicide. If you are a certified organic farmer,
check before using any new product. Home garden users, always read the label and follow the directions.