Maple Diagnosis Cheat Sheet

Symptom-first field reference for common maple diseases, pests, and abiotic disorders in North America. Built to cover Japanese maple, red maple, silver maple, sugar maple, Norway maple, Freeman maple, Amur maple, and other commonly planted Acer species. This is a practical triage sheet, not a lab report.

Use this sheet in order

- 1. Decide whether the problem is mostly leaf-only, or whether twigs, trunk, roots, or the whole canopy are involved.
- 2. Anchor the timing. Cool wet spring points toward anthracnose; late summer scorch raises bacterial leaf scorch or drought stress; spring on young stressed trees raises ambrosia beetles.
- 3. Check distribution. One-sided wilt raises Verticillium; road-facing or splash-side burn raises salt injury; lower/interior spring lesions raise anthracnose.
- 4. Look for signs, not just symptoms: tar-like spots, powdery growth, cottony egg sacs, webbing, frass, mushrooms, rhizomorphs, or round exit holes.
- 5. Expose the root flare before blaming a pathogen. Deep planting and girdling roots commonly mimic maple decline.

Red flags

- Asian longhorned beetle - report immediately; do not move wood or firewood.
- Bacterial leaf scorch - do not label it with certainty without lab confirmation.
- Sudden sectorial wilt with sapwood streaking - treat as possible Verticillium until ruled out.
- Chronic decline with no visible root flare - excavate the root collar before treating for disease.
- Soft crown roots, mushrooms, white fans, or black rhizomorphs - inspect for root/collar rot and assess hazard.

Container and bonsai note

- Container maples swing from drought stress to saturation much faster than in-ground trees.
- Media breakdown, poor drainage, root congestion, and fertilizer or salt buildup can mimic disease.
- Reflected heat, hot benches, and wind exposure can produce scorch even when watering seems adequate.
- For bonsai and patio containers, root inspection and media condition are often higher-yield than foliar treatment.

Five common look-alikes

These mistakes are responsible for a large share of wrong maple diagnoses. Separate the look-alike before you treat.

Often confused	With	Fast separator
Anthracnose	Late frost or scorch	Vein-associated blotches after cool, wet spring; lower and inner canopy first.
Tar spot	Sooty mold	Tar spot is embedded in the leaf tissue; sooty mold wipes off.
Bacterial leaf scorch	Drought or salt scorch	Often repeats on the same limbs in late summer; lab confirmation required.
Verticillium wilt	Girdling roots or drought	Often one-sided with sapwood discoloration in symptomatic branches.
Scale insects	Lichen or bark texture	Live scale covers are fixed, insect-like, and often associated with crawlers, honeydew, or dieback.

Quick rule that prevents expensive mistakes

Do not let dramatic leaf symptoms distract you from the root flare, planting depth, drainage, and recent site history. On maples, deep planting, girdling roots, drought stress, wet media, heat load, and salt injury regularly mimic disease.

Leaf diseases and foliar disorders

Start here when the complaint is mostly about leaf spots, marginal burn, pale leaves, or distorted new growth.

Condition	Fastest field clue	Common look-alike	First move
Anthracnose	Irregular brown blotches along veins and margins after a cool, wet spring; often worse on lower and interior foliage.	Late frost, scorch	Sanitation, reduce stress, do not overreact on established trees.
Tar spot	Yellow spots that become shiny black tar-like lesions embedded in the leaf.	Sooty mold	Rake and remove leaves; mostly cosmetic.
Powdery mildew	White or gray surface growth on leaves or shoots; humid, shaded canopy favors it.	Dust, spray residue	Improve airflow; treat only if repeated and severe.
Phyllosticta leaf spot	Brown or tan spots with purple margins and sometimes tiny black dots.	Anthracnose, herbicide speckling	Remove fallen leaves; usually low urgency.
Physiological scorch	Crisp margins and dry tips during heat, drought, wind, reflected sun, or transplant stress; no pathogen signs.	Bacterial leaf scorch, salt injury	Fix watering and root-zone stress first.
Salt injury	Marginal burn after winter or early spring, often on roadside or splash-facing tissue.	Drought scorch, bacterial leaf scorch	Leach salts, improve drainage, reduce exposure.
Iron chlorosis	Newer leaves show green veins with yellow tissue; alkaline or compacted soils common.	Nitrogen deficiency, herbicide injury	Test soil pH and correct root-zone issues.
Frost or freeze injury	Sudden blackened, limp, or burned new foliage after a cold snap.	Anthracnose	Wait before pruning; water and reassess after new growth.
Herbicide injury	Twisted, cupped, strap-like, puckered, or oddly colored new growth; nearby spray history common.	Virus, insect damage	Stop exposure source and support recovery.

Fast separators for foliar complaints

- Anthracnose and Phyllosticta usually start with true lesions. Scorch problems usually start with dry margins or tips.
- Tar spot is visually dramatic but is usually one of the least urgent maple problems in this sheet.
- Powdery mildew sits on the surface. If the white material wipes or rubs, that points away from tar spot or chlorosis.
- Bacterial leaf scorch can resemble drought. Repetition on the same limbs and late-summer timing raise suspicion, but lab work is still needed.
- Iron chlorosis usually starts on newer leaves first, with the veins staying greener than the blade.

Twigs, branches, trunk, roots, and whole-canopy decline

Move these disorders higher on your list when symptoms are one-sided, recurrent on the same limbs, associated with wounds, or accompanied by root, trunk, or collar clues.

Condition	Fastest field clue	Common look-alike	First move
Verticillium wilt	Sudden wilt or dieback on one side or in scattered branches; sapwood may show green or brown streaking.	Drought, girdling roots	Reduce stress, prune dead wood, confirm before replanting susceptible hosts.
Bacterial leaf scorch [LAB]	Late-summer marginal scorch with a yellow transition band; often repeats on the same limbs year after year.	Drought scorch, salt injury	Submit petiole or leaf tissue for lab confirmation.
Armillaria root rot	Thin crown, small leaves, decline plus mushrooms, white fans under bark, or black rhizomorphs.	Waterlogging, Verticillium	Inspect root collar and assess structural risk.
Root and crown rot	Decline in chronically wet or poorly drained sites; crown or root tissue is soft and brown.	Drought, waterlogging alone	Correct drainage and confirm pathogen before fungicides.
Girdling roots / deep planting	No visible root flare; trunk goes into soil like a telephone pole; chronic decline and poor color.	Verticillium, chlorosis	Excavate the root collar before pursuing exotic causes.
Waterlogging / poor drainage	Wilt or chlorosis despite wet soil; decline after saturation or low-oxygen soil.	Drought, root rot	Restore drainage and aeration.
Soil compaction / construction stress	Delayed decline after trenching, fill, paving, traffic, or grade change.	Primary disease	Stop disturbance and protect the root zone.
Eutypella canker	Flattened or target-like canker centered on an old wound or branch stub; structural weakness possible.	Frost crack, old injury	Assess hazard and prune branch cankers well below the margin if feasible.
Sapstreak (sugar maple)	Sugar maple with sparse small leaves and decline after butt or root injury; basal staining may be present.	Verticillium, chronic decline	Avoid wounding; remove high-risk trees if decline progresses.
Winter bark injury / frost crack	Vertical bark split or southwest injury after winter temperature swings.	Canker	Maintain vigor and monitor for secondary decay or canker.

High-yield root and decline notes

- A missing root flare is one of the most useful clues in maple decline. Expose the collar before treating for wilt or nutrient problems.
- One-sided wilt or dieback raises Verticillium; repeated late-summer scorch on the same limbs raises bacterial leaf scorch.
- Mushrooms, white mycelial fans, or black shoestring-like rhizomorphs at the base raise Armillaria.
- Wilt in wet soil is still a water problem - usually root failure, poor drainage, or low oxygen - not proof that the tree needs more water.
- Construction injury often shows up after the project seems finished.

Insects, mites, scale, and regulatory pests

Look for signs: honeydew, webbing, galls, cottony egg sacs, hard scale covers, frass, exit holes, or obvious insect life stages.

Condition	Fastest field clue	Common look-alike	First move
Aphids	Colonies on tender growth or bark, sticky honeydew, curled shoots, and sooty mold.	Scale insects, lanternfly honeydew	Usually monitor and conserve beneficial insects.
Spider mites	Fine stippling, bronzing, leaf dullness, and sometimes webbing; worse in hot, dry weather.	Nutrient stress, scorch	Check leaf undersides, wash foliage, reduce drought stress.
Maple bladder gall mite	Red, green, or black blister-like galls on leaves; dramatic but usually cosmetic.	Tar spot, fungal spotting	Usually no treatment needed.
Cottony maple scale	White cottony egg sacs like popcorn on twigs in late spring; honeydew below.	Woolly aphids, mealybugs	Use crawler timing if treatment is needed; natural enemies often help.
Oystershell scale / Japanese maple scale	Hard bark-adhered scales on twigs and branches; can blend into bark.	Lichen, bark roughness	Identify the species and target crawlers, not settled covers.
Granulate ambrosia beetle	Toothpick-like frass projecting from bark of young, stressed, or newly transplanted maples in spring.	Transplant failure, other borers	Reduce stress; preventive sprays only work before attack.
Asian longhorned beetle [REPORT]	Dime-sized round exit holes, egg pits, coarse frass, and branch dieback.	Native borers, sapsucker injury	Report immediately; do not move host wood.
Spotted lanternfly	Nymphs or adults on trunks, heavy honeydew, sooty mold, or mud-like egg masses in infested regions.	Aphids, scale insects	Follow state guidance; mechanical control can help on small trees.

Fast separators for pest complaints

- Honeydew alone does not tell you which insect is present. Aphids, soft scales, and lanternfly can all drip sticky residue.
- Spider mite injury becomes more obvious in hot, dry weather and often looks like bronzing or dull stippling rather than clean marginal scorch.
- Gall mites make maple leaves look alarming, but the damage is usually cosmetic once galls have formed.
- For most scale problems, crawler timing matters more than spraying mature covers.
- Asian longhorned beetle is a reporting issue first, not a home-treatment problem.

When to trust the field diagnosis, when to sample, and when to report

Case type	Examples
Best treated as field diagnosis	Tar spot, powdery mildew, maple bladder gall mite, cottony maple scale, obvious salt burn, obvious container scorch.
Best submitted to a diagnostic lab	Bacterial leaf scorch, ambiguous wilt, recurrent root/crown rot, unusual cankers, unexplained decline where removal decisions depend on certainty.
Best treated as a report-first issue	Asian longhorned beetle or any suspect regulatory borer signs.

High-yield field checklist

- Season and weather: cool wet spring, heat and wind, freeze event, or late-summer repeat?
- Canopy pattern: one side, same limb every year, inner canopy, splash side, or uniform whole-tree?
- Signs present: powder, tar spots, black pycnidia, galls, webbing, cottony sacs, mushrooms, frass, round holes?
- Root collar visible? If not, expose it.
- Wet soil, sour media, or slow drainage? Check before treating for wilt.
- Nearby construction, herbicide application, deicing salts, or recent transplanting?

What this sheet covers

This reference intentionally focuses on the disorders and stress syndromes most often encountered on maples in North American landscapes, nurseries, gardens, and containers. It is broad by design, but not an encyclopedia of every rare Acer pathogen.

Selected source base used for the update

USDA APHIS, Canadian Food Inspection Agency, USDA Forest Service, NC State Extension, University of Wisconsin Extension, Virginia Tech Extension, University of Maryland Extension, University of Vermont Extension, Iowa State Extension, Rutgers Nursery IPM, Mississippi State Extension, Colorado State Extension, Purdue Extension, Missouri Extension.

Prepared April 2026. For regulatory pests, current local quarantine and reporting instructions take priority over any generalized field note.