Honey fungus at Sonairte

An agrohomeopathic case

by Mark O'Sullivan Lic.I.S.H. ISHom

There was just a dry twig in a pot, stuck in a shady courtyard at Sonairte, as far as I could see. My workshop participants gathered around while Brigitte explained that it was actually an oak sapling that had been starved of light in this place and, by all appearances, had died. It was an overcast day in Laytown, Co. Meath, Ireland, at the National Ecology Centre, August 2013. After a whole day indoors, outlining agrohomeopathy, the attendees had yet to consider a live case. Some gave the oak a sceptical look and exchanged glances.

'Yes, I'm afraid this one just got left here and I wondered if you could do anything for it.' The scene seemed to be turning into the horticultural version of Monty Python's parrot sketch. Brigitte would not be dissuaded. 'What remedies do you give this tree?' It's dead, so *Carbo vegetabilis*. *Silica* too, since it's the agrohomeopathic panacea for weak, distressed or puny plants and is compatible with *Carbo veg*. Fingers crossed, I prepare some of each remedy in the potencies I have to hand; 6c for *Carbo veg* and 12x for *Silica* in a two-litre solution of water, thumped 50 times on the grass. Brigitte will apply a cupful daily for a week. The class then moved along into the three-acre walled orchard to scrutinise an aphid infestation.

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Before my workshop in Sonairte, I had applied agrohomeopathy for two years volunteering at the Heritage Community Garden, Donnybrook. I'd brought the introductory class to horticulturalists at the Organic College in Dromcollogher, The Organic Centre in Rossinver, Seed Savers in Scarriff, the Kinsale Permaculture students and many an allotment, GIY and community garden group. The GIY annual gathering invited me to Waterford to appear on a discussion panel. I had seen remedies work in cases of slugs, caterpillars, mildew, sawfly, aphids, ants, spider mites, leaf miner and frost-shocked trees. More importantly, I'd seen some remedies not work and had to figure out why – with mixed degrees of effectiveness.

While all of this work had been done with varied methodologies, the focus still remained on individual plants; trees, shrubs, flowers and veggies. Anyone working in organics or holistics knows, however, that this approach can only work so far before it becomes necessary to pan back and look at the bigger picture if recurrent outbreaks or infestations trouble a garden.

A month later I received a call from Brigitte both to let me know that the oak twig had sprouted leaves and, as a result, to ask me back to Sonairte to see if I could help with a progressive case of honey fungus (Armillaria) in the walled orchard.

Armillaria mellea lives in the soil and can predate on trees. Its rhizomorphs creep underfoot, attach themselves to a tree and begin to devour it from the roots upwards. There is no known conventional cure other than putting in rubber barriers and killing everything with toxic sprays.

Its signature is the ring of honey-coloured toadstools that appear around the trunk of the tree in the autumn. These are faintly bioluminescent and, I'm told, pretty tasty when fried in garlic butter. Typically, the tree has a swansong

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Honey fungus is a destructive fungal disease

blaze of flowering and fruiting in its final year before its trunk keels over, no longer supported by living roots. Armillaria then uses the abundant nutrients released to entrench itself and sends its bootlace rhizomorphs outward to find the next susceptible tree nearby. The gardener waits in dread to see on which apple or pear tree the ring of toadstools next appears.

Coillte (see References) have significant problems with honey fungus, particularly after they clear-fell plantations of sitka spruce, leaving only the dead roots in the soil, upon which Armillaria dines, leaving entire plantations infested and re-planting problematic. The hill of Tara is also riddled with this fungus.

At Sonairte, the bootlaces had crept under the wall at the lowest point in the garden, by the banks of the river Nanny. By the time I got to deal with the issue, it was in its third year, and six heritage variety fruit trees had been lost. There was a particularly old apple tree and a damson tree that appeared to be the next course in Armillaria's banquet. A major aim of any treatment would be to save these trees from the onslaught.

It was when these trees were threatened that Luk and Brigitte – the residents of Sonairte's historic estate house – decided to seek help. The oak twig's recovery encouraged them to see if there may be something in the agrohomeopathic toolkit that could turn the garden around without abandoning its organic status.

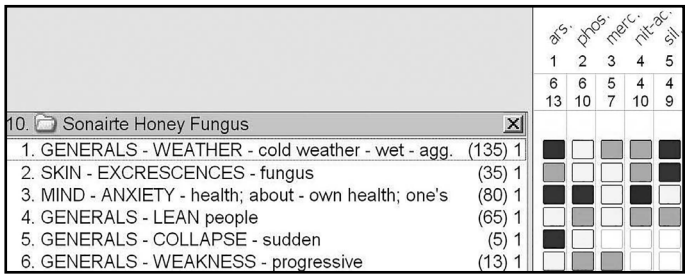
Prescribing for a garden

What to do? I'd have one shot at this, so I decided that, while I would lead with the 'classical' remedy in a medium potency, I would not baulk at pulling in supports from other methodologies in low x potencies with which to make a combination. The aim was not to 'fight' the Armillaria but to restore soil and tree health by changing the whole garden's susceptibilities using homeopathic remedies and, in the process, save the immediately threatened apple and damson trees.

Indicated remedy

Here are the salient indications that I used from the whole situation including garden, soil, trees, fungus and the resident people: Each Autumn when the weather changed to cold and wet, the problem would get worse, the fungus would spread and the owners of the property would get more concerned about the health of the garden. Overall the weakening sickness was a progressive process in the garden. The trees, when they were infected, lit up with flowers and fruit before burning out and collapsing in short order. The Rosaceae family, so susceptible to the honey fungus, and to which the apple and other fruiting trees belong, in general tend to be tall and spindly in appearance.

Given the honey mushrooms were lit with a bioluminescent



glow, the remedy indicated appeared to be *Phosphorus*. The blaze and burnout pattern was very phosphoric – and was appearing to be well when actually ill. *Phos* is a great polycrest in agrohomeopathy too, with particular affinity for issues around flowering and fruiting.

I had checked Kaviraj's *Homeopathy for Farm and Garden* previously for 'honey fungus' but found nothing. Sure enough, after finding *Phos* to be indicated, I looked up 'Armillaria' in Kavi's book, only this time to find it there with that same remedy. Snap. Maute has no mention of it.

Support remedies

I scoured the internet for information on Armillaria – in particular if it had any symbiotes, competitors or enemies which we could fashion into remedies employing the predator principle or tonic / companion methodology. As it turned out, it does have both competitor and symbiote, and they translated beautifully into two remedies which were, as luck would have it, readily available. They were symbiotic *Mycorrhizal soil fungi* and the *Early purple orchid*.

The honey fungus displaces the symbiotic mycorrhizae that are the hallmark of healthy organic soils and kills rather than cooperates with tree roots. It's not unreasonable to conjecture that these healthy soil flora have adapted ways and means of displacing their bootlaced competitor. I had a bottle of foul smelling Mycorrhizal inoculant meant for diluting and spreading over soil as a tincture. This I made up into a 9x potency.

The Early purple orchid or Orchis mascula is a symbiote of Armillaria. As with all orchids, it cooperates with the local mycorrhizae to serve as its root system, having none of its own. I came across this obscure website which made the following claim:

> I believe that the Early purple orchid takes control of the fungi and, in some unknown way, reduces this ravenous parasite into a meek saprophyte. This, I believe, it needs to do because if the Armillaria fungus attempts to attack a living tree, the tree defends itself by manufacturing chemical defences which the fungus will absorb and ... could harm the feeding orchid ... This is a necessity of survival as far as the Early purple orchid is concerned.

A symbiote which could 'switch off' Armillaria's predatory nature?

Honey fungus has both competitor and symbiote, and they translated beautifully into two remedies

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Thought dead, the oak twig sprouted leaves

It had to be tried. As it turns out, *Early purple orchid* is one of the Bailey flower essences.

The prescription we applied to the orchard was *Phos* 200c, *Mycorrhizal inoculant* 9x and *Early purple orchid* essence.

Brigitte, Luk and I made up two-litre bottles of medicating potency which we added to great drums of water that were in turn succussed by pounding repeatedly with poles. We were in high spirits and there was chat and singing throughout. We used watering cans to cover the entire walled garden with the remedy. I was thrilled to return home with a kilo of organic elderberries with which to make that sweetest of winter tonics.

Results

During its three-year stint in Sonairte, Armillaria was forging a clear path away from the river, uphill past the compost beds and into a dense clutch of venerable fruit trees. It had eaten five trees along the way and a large old apple tree near the greenhouse looked to be next. This was one of the 'barometer' trees that we'd use

to gauge the effectiveness of the treatment. The other was a damson tree along the same apparent route which had been half killed – some of its branches already dead. Also, there was extensive coverage of the dead trees with the tan-coloured mushrooms. Ideally, there should be no honey fungus at all!

The fungus had also rather incredibly spread itself out of the walled garden, across over an acre, to kill an ash tree, threatening further damage to the Ash and Hawthorn trees in a hedgerow beyond the wall.

If these 'barometer' trees could be saved, it would be a major indication that the treatment had been effective – another would be the absence of any Armillaria symptoms on the grounds for a few seasons. We gave them each their own dose of *Silica* 12x.

Four months later, in February 2014, Brigitte reported no change in the garden. No spread of the fungus but no trees dying either. She then texted me in June:

> The damson tree has several dead branches but the healthy ones are covered in fruit. The ashes on our side of the wall are showing no sign of ill-health. There is another dead apple tree at the far side but Luk isn't clear about whether that was so before. So good in all!

As autumn approached with the return of the cold and damp weather, I wondered if there'd be a recurrence of the fungus. We had an alert for what looked like honey fungus close to the house. As a precaution, we applied all the remedies again, one year after we had first covered the garden. Then Brigitte texted me in October, when the fungus ought to have been at its height of visibility.

> Hi Mark! There is no trace of the fungus in the garden – except at the bottom of one apple tree where there is dark brown slimy stuff – everywhere else is without a mark. Like magic! I have noticed before that it goes very quickly but as I say NO trace – so next year will tell.'

That was last year. Sonairte remained free of the honey fungus until this autumn when fruiting bodies poked their heads up at the base of just two trees – a small apple tree at the very top of the orchard and a single hawthorn beyond the wall; both in previously untreated areas.

The orchard received its third application of the remedies in as many years and ought really to have been treated earlier this year. This has usefully served to jolt out any complacency that arose from comfortably assuming Sonairte's susceptibility to Armillaria had been resolved. Brigitte and Luk have resolved to treat the land again in late summer for the next two years regardless. This case's story may not yet be over but the dramatic lessening in the extent of the recurrent infestation is consistent with a more realistic, positive trend towards cure. I received word from Brigitte in early September 2016 that, up until that time, there had been no recurrence of the honey fungus at Sonairte.

Meanwhile, the thriving oak twig has sprouted and is a fine young tree, growing away, planted out in the garden.

The oak twig is now a growing tree

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Honey fungus

Honey fungus is the common name given to several different species of fungi (Armillaria) that attack and kill the roots of many woody and perennial plants. The most characteristic symptom of honey fungus is white fungal growth between the bark and wood usually at ground level. Clumps of honey coloured toadstools sometimes appear briefly on infected stumps in autumn. Honey fungus is the most destructive fungal disease in UK gardens. (rhs.org.uk)

REFERENCES

Coillte is the Irish natural resource management agency: http://www.coillte.ie

The 'Webmesh' website with the info on the Early Purple Orchid: http://www.webmesh.co.uk/experiment1.htm

UK Royal Horticultural Society's page on honey fungus: https://w.rhs.org.uk/advice/profile?PID=180

Video of the initial visit to Sonairte to assess the extent of the infestation: https://youtube/_jp88JXLaa4

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This updated article was orignally published in the Winter 2015 edition of the Irish Homeopathic Times.

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