mySites.guru

How to Stop Any Plugin Installs in WordPress Admin

Add DISALLOW_FILE_MODS to wp-config.php to block plugin and theme installs in WordPress admin. Code snippet, wp-cli usage, and how to enforce it.

Phil E. Taylor | 25 March 2026

Why does the WordPress admin let anyone install code?

Out of the box, any WordPress administrator can install plugins and themes directly from the WordPress dashboard. They can also upload ZIP files containing arbitrary PHP code, and edit existing plugin and theme files through the built-in code editor.

For a single-user blog, this is convenient. For a professionally managed site with multiple admin users, it's a gaping security hole. If an attacker has already used this to compromise your site, here's how to confirm the hack and respond.

Consider what "install a plugin" really means in WordPress: it's uploading and executing arbitrary PHP code on your web server. The WordPress plugin directory has quality guidelines, but the upload functionality accepts any ZIP file - including ones downloaded from random websites, received via email, or crafted by an attacker.

What is the WordPress security case for DISALLOW_FILE_MODS?

Compromised admin accounts

The most common WordPress hack path is a stolen or brute-forced admin password, not a zero-day exploit. Once an attacker has admin access, installing a malicious plugin is the fastest way to establish a persistent backdoor.

With `DISALLOW_FILE_MODS` enabled, even a compromised admin account can't install plugins, upload themes, or edit PHP files through the WordPress interface. The attacker still has admin access (which is bad), but they can't escalate from "can manage content" to "can execute arbitrary code on the server."

Unauthorized installations

On sites with multiple admins - common in agencies, marketing teams, and organizations - there's always someone who wants to install "just one more plugin"

without testing it. Maybe it's a social sharing widget, maybe it's a page builder, maybe it's something they found in a blog post.

Every plugin added to a WordPress site is code that needs to be maintained, updated, and security-audited. Uncontrolled plugin installations lead to bloated, slow, vulnerable sites.

Supply chain attacks

Compromised plugins in the WordPress directory are a recurring problem. When a legitimate plugin is sold to a new developer who pushes a malicious update, sites with auto-updates enabled install the malicious version automatically. You can disable automatic updates entirely as a first line of defence. With `DISALLOW_FILE_MODS` on, even if auto-updates are enabled at the WordPress level, the file modification is blocked. If you also manage Joomla sites, be aware that Joomla 5.4+ has its own automated core updates that should be reviewed and disabled for the same reasons.

How do you set DISALLOW_FILE_MODS manually?

Add this line to wp-config.php:

```
define('DISALLOW_FILE_MODS', true);
```

This immediately:

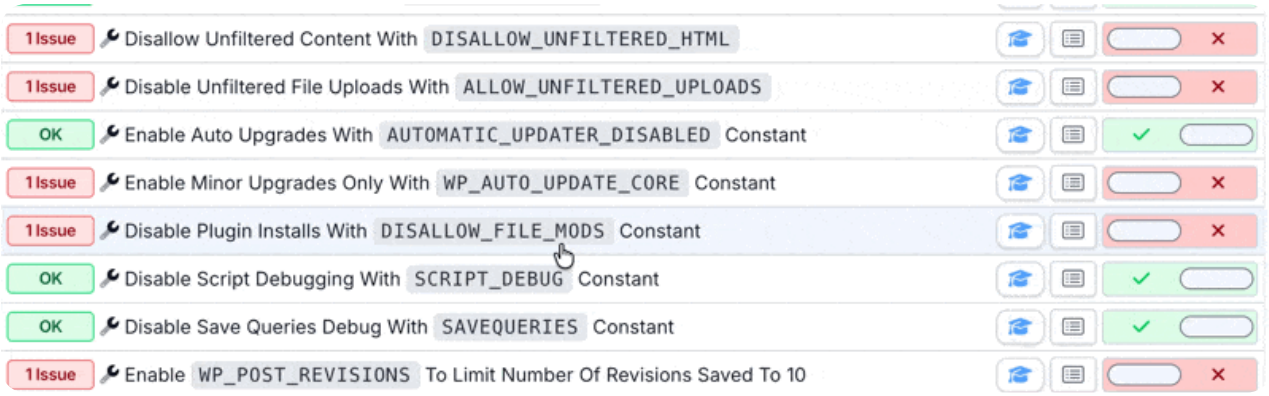
- Removes the Plugin Editor and Theme Editor from the admin menu
- Hides the "Add New" button on the Plugins and Themes screens
- Blocks plugin and theme uploads through the admin
- Prevents automatic updates from modifying files (note: this is more aggressive than `AUTOMATIC_UPDATER_DISABLED`)

The manual process for multiple sites: SSH into each server, edit wp-config.php, verify the change, repeat. And keep checking that nobody has removed it.

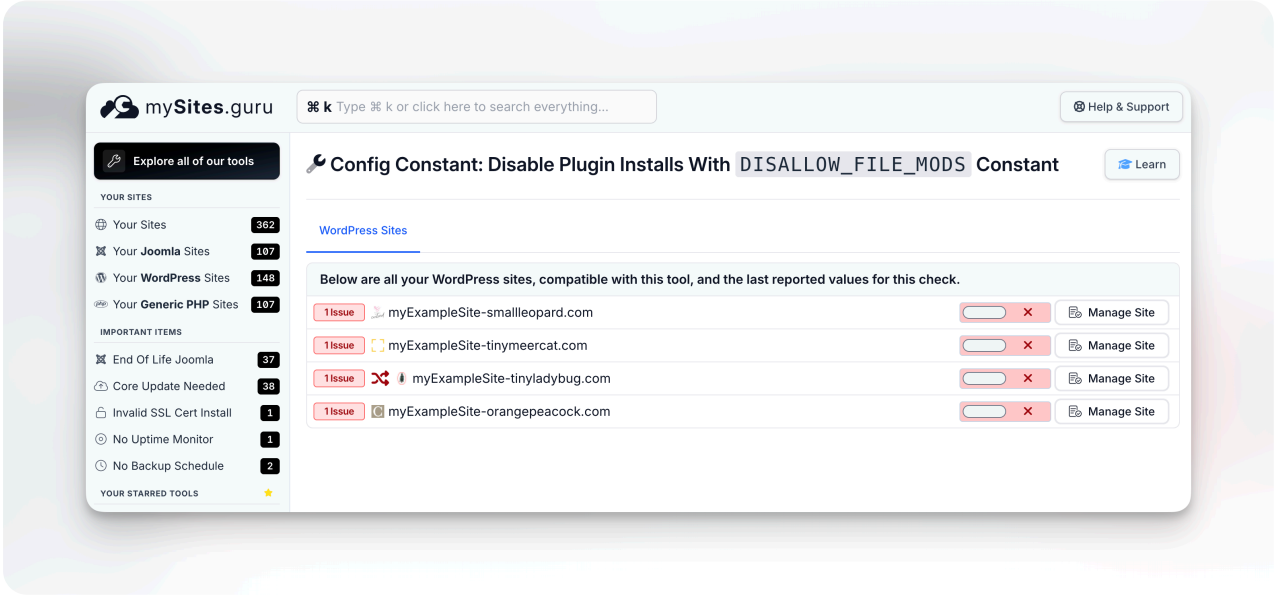
How does mySites.guru manage DISALLOW_FILE_MODS?

mySites.guru's WordPress Configuration audit reads `DISALLOW_FILE_MODS` from wp-config.php on every connected site. If it's not set to `true`, the audit flags it.

Click fix, and the connector sets it.



You can also view this constant across all your WordPress sites at once and toggle each one individually from the all-sites tool view.



If the constant gets removed later (WordPress upgrade, another admin, hosting provider auto-configuration), the next snapshot catches it again. It works the same way

as the one-click toggles for debug constants and removing the WordPress logo from the admin bar - the dashboard flags the issue and you fix it without editing files.

But how do I update WordPress plugins then?

If you block file modifications in the admin, how do you keep plugins and themes updated?

Several options:

WP-CLI - the command-line tool for WordPress isn't affected by `DISALLOW_FILE_MODS`. You can run `wp plugin update --all` via SSH.

SFTP/SSH deployment - upload updated plugin files directly to the server, bypassing the WordPress admin entirely.

mySites.guru - the connector plugin operates at a level that can apply updates independently of the WordPress admin interface. You manage updates from the mySites.guru dashboard while keeping the WordPress admin locked down. For the full workflow, see how to manage multiple WordPress sites like a pro.

`DISALLOW_FILE_MODS` separates two concerns that WordPress normally bundles together:

1. **Content management** - creating pages, writing posts, managing users (still works)
2. **Code management** - installing plugins, editing themes, modifying PHP files (blocked)

On a well-managed site, different people (or systems) handle these two concerns. Content editors don't need to install plugins. Plugin updates happen through a controlled process, not through the WordPress admin UI.

What about WordPress ALLOW_UNFILTERED_UPLOADS?

There's a related constant that's more dangerous in practice: `ALLOW_UNFILTERED_UPLOADS`. When set to `true`, it lets administrators upload any file type through the WordPress media library - PHP files, executables, anything.

WordPress normally restricts uploads to safe file types like images, PDFs, and documents. `ALLOW_UNFILTERED_UPLOADS` removes that restriction entirely. Some developers enable it to upload SVGs or custom font files, then forget to turn it off.

If an attacker compromises an admin account on a site with unfiltered uploads enabled, they can upload a PHP backdoor directly through the media uploader. No plugin installation needed, no theme editor required - just drag and drop a `.php` file into the media library.

```
define('ALLOW_UNFILTERED_UPLOADS', false);
```

Keep this set to `false` (or better yet, don't define it at all - `false` is the default). If you need SVG uploads, use a plugin that sanitises SVG files rather than opening the door to every file type.

mySites.guru's WordPress Configuration audit checks this constant alongside `DISALLOW_FILE_MODS`. If unfiltered uploads are enabled on any of your sites, you'll see it flagged and can disable it with one click.

How does this fit into a WordPress defence-in-depth strategy?

Locking down file modifications works best alongside other hardening steps: disabling XML-RPC, limiting post revisions, closing the unauthenticated database repair endpoint, enforcing minor-only core updates, removing leftover default content like the Sample Page and Hello World post, and enforcing strong passwords with 2FA.

mySites.guru's audit checks all of these in the same snapshot. You see your security posture across every site on one screen, and any configuration drift gets caught

automatically. For more on what the audit covers, see the best practice guide.

This is one of several hardening measures in our agency security guide.

Frequently Asked Questions

What does DISALLOW_FILE_MODS do in WordPress?

When set to true, DISALLOW_FILE_MODS prevents anyone from installing, updating, or editing plugins and themes through the WordPress admin panel. It removes the plugin/theme editor, hides the 'Add New' buttons, and blocks file upload capabilities. Updates must be applied through other means like WP-CLI, SSH, or a management tool like mySites.guru.

Why should I disable plugin installs on production WordPress sites?

If an attacker gains admin access to your WordPress site, the first thing they typically do is install a malicious plugin - it's the easiest way to get a persistent backdoor. Disabling file modifications means even a compromised admin account can't upload malicious code through the WordPress interface. It also prevents well-meaning but unauthorised users from installing untested plugins on production sites.

Can I still update plugins if DISALLOW_FILE_MODS is enabled?

Not through the WordPress admin UI - that's the point. You can still update plugins via WP-CLI, SFTP, or a management platform like mySites.guru that applies updates through its own connector rather than the WordPress admin interface. This separates the ability to manage content from the ability to modify code on the server.

What does ALLOW_UNFILTERED_UPLOADS do and why is it dangerous?

When set to true, ALLOW_UNFILTERED_UPLOADS removes WordPress's file type restrictions on media uploads, allowing administrators to upload any file including PHP scripts. An attacker with admin access can upload a backdoor directly through the media library without needing to install a plugin. Keep it set to false or leave it undefined.

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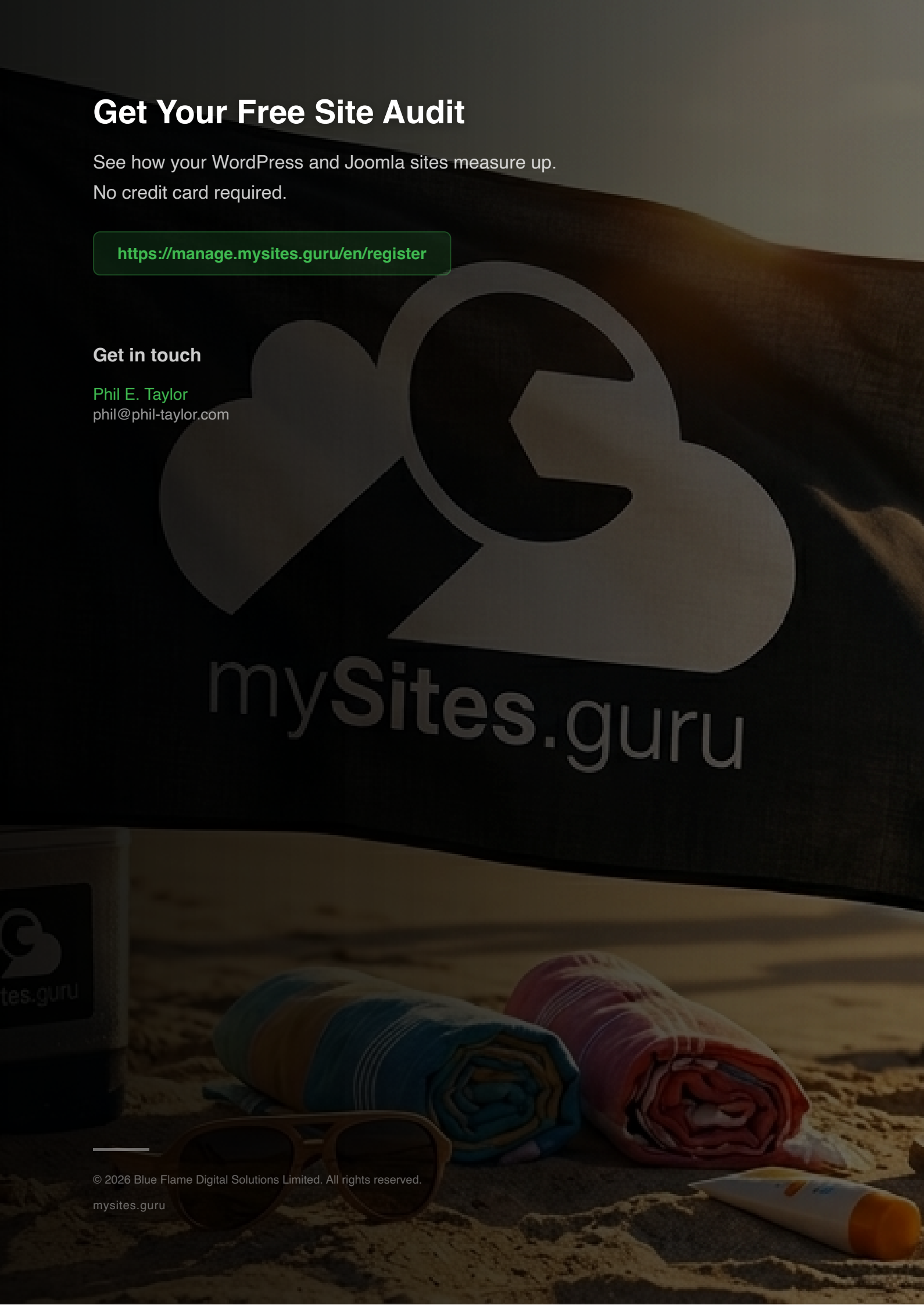

Get in touch

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