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MULCHING TOMATOES

Soils are warm enough now that tomatoes can benefit from mulching. Tomatoes prefer even levels of soil moisture and mulches provide such by preventing excessive evaporation. Other benefits of mulching include weed suppression, moderating soil temperatures and preventing the formation of a hard crust on the soil. Crusted soils restrict air movement into and out of the soil and slow the water infiltration rate. Hay and straw mulches are very popular for tomatoes but may contain weed or volunteer grain seeds. Grass clippings can also be used but should be applied as a relatively thin layer – only 2 to 3 inches thick. Clippings should also be dry as wet clipping can mold and become so hard that water can't pass through. Also, do not use clippings from lawns that have been treated with a weed killer until some time has passed. With most types of weed killers, clippings from the fourth mowing after treatment may be used. If the lawn was treated with a product containing quinclorac (Drive), the clippings should not be used as mulch. If the weed killer used has a crabgrass killer, it likely contains quinclorac.

Ants and Peonies

This time of year we often receive questions about ants crawling on peony buds. The ants are feeding on an exudate from the bud; they do not feed on the flowers themselves. The exudates is high in sugar and therefore a good energy source for the ants. The ants also seem to help protect the buds from other insects that would like to feed on the buds. This is a symbiotic relationship one in which a relationship between two organisms works to the benefit of both. The ant gains a high value food source, and the peony receives flower-bud protection. So if you see ants on your peonies, leave them be. They are not harming the peonies.

Euonymus Scale

Euonymus scales look like small white cottony spots on affected euonymus foliage. Leaves eventually turn yellow and die as feeding continues. Males are white and elongated, and females are brown and oval shaped and about 1/16 inch long. Large numbers congregate on the undersides of leaves, twigs, and stems. About 60 days are required to complete a generation. In Kansas, there are two generations per year. The first generation occurs in the spring and the second in late August to early September.

Overwintering females lay eggs that hatch in mid- to late- May or early June. This period usually occurs when fringetrees, (Chionanthus), cockspur hawthorn (Crataegus crusgalli), Beautybush (Kolkwitzia amabilis) and Late Lilac (Syringa villosa) are in bloom. Crawlers (young scale that have recently hatched) move to leaves and stems and begin to feed by sucking plant juices. Maturing males prefer leaves and females congregate on stems. We have already seen active crawlers in the Wichita area.

The crawler stage is when euonymus scale is most easily controlled. Therefore, check to be sure crawlers are present before treating. Use a magnifying lens to identify the very small crawlers. If nothing is moving, crawlers are not active yet.

Labeled insecticides include malathion and acephate (Hi-Yield Acephate or Ortho Systemic Insect Killer), permethrin (Hi-Yield 38 Plus Turf Termite and Ornamental Insect Control, Hi-Yield Indoor/Outdoor Broad Use Insecticide and Lawn & Garden Insect Killer, Fertlome Indoor\Outdoor Multi-Purpose Insect Spray) or cyhalothrin (Spectracide Triazicide, Bonide Caterpillar Killer). Control is probably impossible for euonymus that has been heavily attacked and is in very poor health. Therefore, complete removal and destruction of these heavily infested plants (including roots) is suggested.

Anthracoze on Sycamore and other Shade Trees

We are starting to see anthracnose on sycamore. Anthracnose is a fungal disease favored by cool, wet weather. Young leaves may wither and turn black. On older leaves, look for brown areas that follow the major veins of the leaves. In some cases, the petiole (leaf stem) is infected, which causes leaf drop. The leaf may look perfectly fine, so look for browned areas on the petiole.

In severe cases, the tree drops heavily infected leaves and may be completely defoliated. Healthy trees will leaf out again in a few weeks. Defoliation this early in the year does not affect overall tree health. Trees have plenty of time to produce new leaves and make the energy reserves needed to survive the winter.

Other types of trees that are affected by anthracnose include birch, elm, walnut, oak and especially ash. Anthracnose seldom causes significant damage to trees in Kansas, so chemical controls are usually unnecessary. Also, fungicides do not cure infected leaves. Applying fungicides now will not help.

Straw Bale Gardening

There has been growing interest in straw bale gardening. What better place to try this than in Kansas where straw is so abundant. Though we have plenty of hay, I have to admit that I am not a fan of this, soil seems like a much better medium to me. But if you care to try it, here are some pointers.

- These are the “small” straw bales that are about 2 feet high and 3 feet long.
- Place the bale on edge so the twine doesn’t rot.
- Bales can be placed anywhere including concrete or asphalt. Just make sure there is plenty of sun and watering is convenient

Bale Conditioning

- Water the bales and keep them wet for 3 days. The bale will start to heat up as it breaks down.
- On days 4, 5 and 6, sprinkle fertilizer on the top of each bale with 1 cup of ammonium sulfate (21-0-0) or ½ cup of urea (46-0-0). Water the fertilizer in. This speeds the decomposition process.
- On days 7, 8 and 9, continue to sprinkle fertilizer on each bale but cut the amount in half.
- Stop fertilizing on day 10 but keep the bale moist.
- Check for heat on the top of each bale for each day after day 10. When the temperature drops to below 100, the bale can be planted.

Planting

- Pocket Method: Make a hole for each plant several inches deep and fill with growing medium.
 - Flat Bed Method: Cover the top of the bale with 3 to 4 inches of growing medium. • The growing medium can be well-aged manure, compost or potting soil.e
- Number of Plants per Bale**
- Cantaloupe: 2 • Cucumber: 3-4 • Peppers: 3-5 • Squash (winter) 2
 - Squash (summer) 2-3 • Tomatoes 2-3

Watering

Watering will be the most challenging aspect of management. The straw will dry quickly. A drip irrigation system on a timer can work well but may take some time to set up. Gardeners may also use soda bottles or milk jugs to water by poking drip holes in the lid, filling with water and then turning upside down next to the target plant.