

HOW LOW SHOULD YOU GO?

I am often asked whether it is good to mow lower in the spring. The answer is yes and no. It doesn't hurt to mow lower than normal the first mowing or two. As a matter of fact, it can actually speed green-up by removing old, dead grass and allowing the soil to warm up faster. But the mowing height should be raised to normal after the first or second cutting to discourage crabgrass. Crabgrass seed must have light to germinate, and a high mowing height will shade the soil. Also, root depth and mowing height are related on upright growing grasses such as tall fescue and Kentucky bluegrass — the higher the height of cut, the deeper the root system. A deeper root system means a more drought-resistant turf. So, how low should you go on the first cutting? On tall fescue and Kentucky bluegrass, you can mow as low as 1½ inches. Be careful you don't go so low that you scalp the turf. Normal mowing height for Kentucky bluegrass is 2 to 3 inches and for tall fescue is 3 to 3½ inches.

Brown Coloration on Junipers

Certain eastern redcedar and various other junipers are showing a brownish cast when viewed from a distance. This may be the male cones. Male cones are on the tips of the foliage and look somewhat like a cross between a miniature hand grenade and a pinecone. Shaking the branches on dry days often releases a cloud of pollen. Most junipers are dioecious, meaning they have both male and female plants. About half the junipers (the males) have this coloration. Female cones are much less obvious. If you are concerned about the brown color, check plants to ensure male cones are the cause. If they are, this is normal and will fade with time.

Laying Plastic Mulch

Plastic mulch is sometimes used to start vegetables such as tomatoes and melons earlier than normal. Commercial growers use a machine to lay the mulch, but home gardeners must do this by hand. Following are some tips on how this is done.

1. *Fertilize according to soil test.* You won't be able to add fertilizer after the plastic is down.
2. *Work the soil* so that the bed can be easily shaped.
3. Use a *garden hoe* to form a *trench along all edges* of the plastic. The soil should be pulled to the outside of the bed. The trench should be formed six inches in from the edge of the plastic and extend along both sides and both ends. The trench should be deep and wide enough to bury six inches of plastic.
4. *Lay trickle irrigation tube* down the center of the bed. This isn't absolutely necessary but it makes it much easier to water. Overhead watering will hit the plastic and roll off.
5. *Lay the plastic down and cover the edges with soil.* You may need to slit the edge of the plastic where the trickle irrigation tube enters the end of the bed.
6. *Plant when the soil temperature reaches the correct temperature* for the crop (55 degrees for tomatoes and 60 degrees for melons) at a 2.5-inch depth. Check the temperature at about 11:00 a.m. to get a good average temperature. Check for several days in a row to ensure the temperature is stable.

Starting Tomatoes Early

If you would like to have your tomato plants produce earlier in the year, there are certain things to keep in mind. Most people who try to get a jump on the season set their tomatoes out early and hope they do well. However, that is often not a good plan, as tomatoes have to have certain requirements before they will grow well. Those requirements are an acceptable soil temperature for root growth and an acceptable air temperature for both plant growth and fruit set.

Root Growth: Tomatoes need a soil temperature of at least 55 degrees to do well. Plastic mulch is most commonly used to warm the soil. Several days may be needed to raise the soil temperature. Check the soil temperature 2.5 inches deep in the soil at about 11:00 a.m. If that is not possible, check the temperature before leaving for work and again when your return and use the average of the two. You may wish to lay a drip irrigation line before installing the plastic to make watering more convenient. See accompanying article on laying plastic mulch.

Air Temperature: Plants must be protected from frost. Hot caps or water teepees are placed over the young plants to provide protection as well as a higher average temperature to encourage growth. Eventually the plants will outgrow the cover and start to develop flowers. But if the temperature goes below 55 degrees at night, tomato flowers may not set.

The plant is not hurt, but the blossom will not set fruit or, if it does set fruit, the fruit is often misshapen. How early can you transplant? Start with a date about 2 weeks earlier than normal.

Herbicides for Home Vegetable Gardens

Though mulches and hoeing are usually all that is needed for small vegetable gardens, homeowners with large areas may need the help of herbicides to keep ahead of the weeds. One preemergence and one postemergence herbicide can be used on home vegetable gardens. The preemergence herbicide is trifluralin. Preemergence herbicides kill weed seeds as they germinate. They usually have no effect on weeds that have emerged. Therefore, they must be put on either before weeds come up in the spring or after weeds have been physically removed. The **preemergence herbicide trifluralin** is sold under the trade names of Treflan, Preen, Miracle-Gro Garden Weed Preventer, Gordon's Garden Weed Preventer Granules and Monterey Vegetable and Ornamental Weeder.

The **postemergence herbicide is sethoxydim**. This product only kills grasses; broadleaves are not affected. It can be sprayed directly over the top of many vegetables. Sethoxydim is sold as Poast, Monterey Grass Getter, and Hi-Yield Grass Killer. A second postemergence herbicide called fluzifop-p-butyl is labeled for commercial growers as Fusilade, but I haven't found vegetables listed on the homeowner labels, "Over the Top Grass Killer" and "Grass-No-More." Also, the other homeowner products mentioned above often do not have as many vegetables on the label as the commercial products. Even among the homeowner products with the same active ingredient, there may be slight differences among labels. Check product labels to be sure the crop is listed. For example, trifluralin can be used on asparagus, but must be applied before spears emerge.