

Time to Plant Potatoes

St. Patrick's Day is just around the corner, so it is time to get seed potatoes in the ground. Actually any time from mid- to late-March is fine for potato planting. Be sure to buy seed potatoes rather than using those bought for cooking. Seed potatoes are certified disease free and have plenty of starch to sprout as quickly as soil temperatures allow. Most seed potatoes can be cut into four pieces, though large potatoes may yield more, and small less. Each seed piece should be between 1.5 and 2 ounces and include at least one eye to ensure there is enough energy for germination. Each pound of potatoes should yield 8 to 10 seed pieces. Cut the seed 2 to 3 days before planting so freshly cut surfaces have a chance to suberize, or toughen, and form a protective coating. Storing seed in a warm location during suberization will speed the process. Plant each seed piece about 1 to 2 inches deep and 8 to 12 inches apart in rows. Though it is important to plant potatoes in March, emergence is slow. It is often mid- to late-April before new plants poke their way through the soil. As the potatoes grow, pull soil up to the base of the plants. New potatoes are borne above the planted seed piece, and it is important to keep sunlight from hitting the new potatoes. Exposed potatoes will turn green and produce a poisonous substance called solanine, keeping the potatoes covered will prevent this.

Pruning Raspberries and Blackberries

Raspberries and blackberries are perennial plants with biennial canes. In other words, a single plant will last many years but an individual cane will only live for two. In a cane's first year, it will grow but will not produce fruit. The second year, it will fruit and then die. Though these canes can be removed after they have finished fruiting, many gardeners wait until now to remove them. Dead canes are not difficult to identify. They are a much lighter color than live canes and are dry and brittle. These canes should be removed and discarded. The remaining canes should be thinned but the type of growth determines exactly how this should be done. Black and purple raspberries and thornless blackberries tend to grow in a clump. Remove all the canes but 5 to 7 of the largest and healthiest in each clump. Cut back the remaining canes to living tissue if there was winter damage. Thornless blackberries will also produce a few suckers that come up some distance from the clump. These should be removed or dug and transplanted to increase the planting. Red raspberries and thorny blackberries sucker badly and will fill the row with new plants. Prune out small canes within the row so that there are strong canes 4 to 6 inches apart. Head back all the remaining canes to about 5 feet. Keep aisles free of new suckers during the summer by mowing. We now have what is called ever-bearing red raspberries and everbearing thorny blackberries. These are the exception to the rule in that they will bear fruit on first-year canes. Therefore, you can cut all canes to the ground in the winter and still have fruit. Examples include Heritage red raspberry and Prime-Jim, Prime-Jan, Prime Ark 45 and Prime Freedom.

Strawberry Mulch Removal

Research done in Illinois has shown that the straw mulch should be removed from strawberry plants when the soil temperature is about 40 degrees F. Fruit production drops if the mulch remains as the soil temperature increases. If a thermometer is not available, remove the mulch as new growth starts in the spring. Do not completely remove all the straw as there are likely to be freezing temperatures that can injure or kill blossoms. Keep the mulch between rows to conveniently recover the berries when freezing temperatures are predicted. Also, remove only enough mulch that the leaves peak through. The remaining mulch will help keep berries from rotting due to contact with the soil.

An Old-Time Concoction for Mildew Control on Peaches

The following "recipe" was a recommendation for the control of mildew on peach made in 1849. We list it to show the good-old-days may not have been so good. Mix 26 gallons of urine with 6.5 gallons of pigeon dung and allow to ferment for 48 hours. Then add 2.2 pounds of aconite (Monk's Hood) branches and 3.8 gallons of water. Apply mixture to peach leaves. A single application in April was said to provide year-long control. We

have not done any efficacy studies, nor do we plan to. The preceding was from a fascinating book titled, "The Truth About Garden Remedies" by Jeff Gillman.

Nightcrawlers in the Lawn

If you have mounds of soil in your lawn, nightcrawlers may be the cause. These bumps are randomly spaced rather than a "run" that is characteristic of moles. Nightcrawlers are large worms -- usually 4 to 8 inches or more. They belong to a group of earthworms known as deep-burrowers. The deep-burrowers build large, vertical, permanent burrows that may reach as deep as 5 or 6 feet. Nightcrawlers pull plant material down into their burrows to feed on later. The bumps you see on top of the ground are called "middens" and are a mixture of plant residues and castings (worm feces). These middens may be used for protection and food reserves. The burrows can have a significant positive effect on soil by opening up channels for water and air to penetrate. Roots also like these channels because they ease root penetration and supply nutrients from the casting material lining the burrow. The middens, however, are a source of aggravation for homeowners. They can make it hard to mow or even walk on a lawn because they become very hard when they dry. Getting rid of the middens is difficult. Rolling the lawn while the middens are soft may help temporarily, but mounds will be rebuilt when nightcrawlers become active again. Also, there is nothing labeled for nightcrawler control. Some gardeners want to protect the nightcrawlers because of their positive effect on soils. Pesticides that may be used for other pests vary widely in their toxic effects on earthworms. One that has no effect is Dylox (Proxol). Malathion may be slightly toxic while Sevin and copper are extremely toxic. Avoid using the latter group while nightcrawlers are active.