

MULCHING TOMATOES

Soils are warm enough now that tomatoes can benefit from mulching though this practice may have to be delayed due to wet soils. Tomatoes prefer even levels of soil moisture and mulch provides 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.

Reducing Fruit Numbers on Apple Trees

Apple trees often produce excess fruit. Removing some of these extra fruits during the next three weeks is important. There can be two major benefits from fruit thinning. The first is to help ensure a return bloom for a good fruit crop next year. Apples produce fruit buds for next year's crop during June; the same time this year's fruit is maturing. Too many fruit this year leads to a lack of fruit bud development and a small crop next year. This leads to biennial bearing in which an apple tree produces a large crop one year and very few fruit the next. Thinning helps ensure that apples are produced each year. The second benefit of thinning is to promote larger fruit on this year's crop. Generally, an average spacing throughout a tree of about 4 inches per fruit is sufficient for a good return next year, as well as good size on the fruits to be harvested this fall.

Squirrel Damage to Trees

Tree squirrels can cause a couple types of tree damage. Most commonly they clip the tips of branches. The length of severed branches is often 2 to 3 feet though they can be longer or shorter. When squirrels snip off a branch, they cut it at about a 45-degree angle and the cut is rather tattered. This is a nuisance type of damage and normally does not harm the health of the tree.

More serious damage is caused when squirrels strip the bark off of limbs or rarely, the trunk. Wounds can be quite large and the squirrel can effectively girdle the branch by removing all the bark completely around the circumference. Branches girdled in this way will die and the tree may be ruined if those branches are major. Why squirrels do this is still a bit of a mystery. Some people think it is simply a means to sharpen their teeth or that they are seeking nesting material or water. Other people think that there are certain squirrels that are high-strung and cause this damage out of nervous energy. If the damage is limited to snipping the ends off of branches, it is probably best to ignore the activity as the tree suffers little harm. But if real damage is occurring due to extensive bark removal, try feeding and watering them. If that doesn't work, control may be necessary. Fox and gray squirrels are game animals and can be hunted in season where it is legal and safe to do so. They can also be trapped and moved from where they're causing damage.

Flooding Damage

Waterlogged soils push out oxygen that roots need to survive. Every living cell in a plant must have oxygen or it dies. Some plants have mechanisms to provide oxygen to the roots even under saturated conditions but most of our vegetables and flowers do not. The longer these plants are subjected to saturated soils, the more likely damage will occur. Usually, as long as water drains away within 24 hours, the impact on plant health is minimal. However, shallow, stagnant water under hot, sunny conditions can literally cook plants, reducing survival time to as little as a few hours.

Vegetables: What about safety regarding eating produce from a garden that has been flooded? Standing water should not cause a safety problem as long as the aboveground portions of the plant remain healthy. Do not use produce from plants that have yellowed. Also, using produce flooded with water contaminated with sewage (lagoon) or animal manure can also be dangerous. The safest approach is to discard all garden crops that have been in contact with such water. Certainly, leafy vegetables should always be discarded. However, you may eat fruit from such crops as tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, sweet corn, squash, cucumbers, and similar vegetables that develops after the waters have subsided as long as the fruit is not cracked or soft. Always wash vegetables thoroughly before eating.

Lawns: Under the cool conditions of early spring, turfgrasses can often survive several days of flooding. However, during hot, sunny conditions with shallow, stagnant water, lawns may be damaged quickly, sometimes in a few hours. This situation often occurs when shallow depressions in a lawn allow water to pool. Note such areas and fill in with

additional soil once the waters have subsided.

Trees: Trees differ markedly in their ability to withstand flooding. Some trees have mechanisms in place to provide oxygen to the roots of plants with water saturated soils and others do not. However, most trees will maintain health if flood waters recede in 7 days or less. It also helps if water is flowing rather than stagnant as flowing water contains more oxygen. If the roots of sensitive trees are flooded for long periods of time, damage will occur including leaf drop, iron chlorosis, leaf curl, branch dieback, and in some cases, tree death. Another danger of flooding is the deposition of sediment. An additional layer of silt 3 inches or more can also restrict oxygen to the roots. If possible, remove deep layers of sediment as soon as conditions permit. This is especially important for small or recently transplanted trees. Try to avoid any additional stress to the trees this growing season. Ironically, one of the most important practices is to water trees if the weather turns dry. Flooding damages roots and therefore the root system is less efficient in making use of available soil water. Timely waterings are vital to a tree's recovery. Also be diligent in removing any dead or dying branches which may serve as a point of entry for disease organisms or insect pests. The following information on tree survival came from the US forest Service.

Trees Tolerant of Flooding: Can survive one growing season under flooded conditions. Red maple, silver maple, pecan, hackberry, persimmon, white ash, green ash, sweetgum, sycamore, eastern cottonwood, pin oak and baldcypress.

Trees Moderately Tolerant of Flooding: Can survive 30 consecutive days under flooded conditions. River birch, downy hawthorn, honeylocust, swamp white oak, southern red oak, bur oak, willow oak and American elm.

Trees Sensitive to Flooding: Unable to survive more than a few days of flooding during the growing season. Redbud, flowering dogwood, black walnut, red mulberry, most pines, white oak, blackjack oak, red oak and black oak.

After the Flood: Soils often become compacted and crusted after a heavy rainfall. This also can restrict oxygen to the roots. Lightly scraping the soil to break this crust will help maintain a healthy root system and therefore, a healthy plant. Be careful not to cultivate too deeply as shallow roots may be damaged. If you think the excessively wet weather will continue, bedding up the rows before planting even just a couple of inches, will improve drainage and allow for better aeration.