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Look at All the Painted Ladies

This year, throughout Kansas, we have seen an abundance and wonderful display of painted lady (*Vanessa cardui*) butterflies. The painted lady butterfly is one of the most common and widely distributed butterflies worldwide. Adults are distinct [and very different looking than the monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*)] having wings that are mottled brown-yellow, white, brown, and black. There is a row of “small” eyespots on the underside of the hindwings. In addition, there is a white crescent on the front edge of the forewing. Painted lady adults feed on the nectar of many different plants in flower including sage (*Salvia* spp.), stonecrop (*Sedum* spp.), butterfly bush (*Buddleia* spp.), and coneflower (*Echinacea* spp.). The larvae are spiny and feed on the leaves of various plants including sunflower (*Helianthus* spp.), hollyhock (*Alcea rosea*), burdock (*Arctium* spp.), and thistle (*Cirsium* or *Carduus* spp.). The painted lady overwinters as an adult; however, most die during the winter (if we have a so-called winter). The painted lady adults migrate northward from the southwest from March through November with two flight periods. In fact, painted lady adults can fly >600 miles. It is possible that the front associated with Hurricane Harvey this year may have “pushed” more adults northward into Kansas. However, this is not the first time Kansas has experienced a plethora of painted lady butterflies. For instance, a migration flight in 1983 was so extensive that butterflies hitting windshields were a hazard to motorists. In addition, a single northward migration contained approximately 3 billion painted lady butterflies. So, just enjoy a wonder of nature...lots of painted lady butterflies .

Corn Gluten Meal as a Herbicide

Corn gluten meal is a natural byproduct of corn wet-milling process and has been found to kill weeds as they germinate. It will also harm the germinating seed of desirable plants. It has no effect on weeds that are already present or on existing desirable plants. It also is a fertilizer with 8% nitrogen. There are a number of commercially available products including Wow Supreme, Organic Weed Preventer, Corn Gluten Weed Preventer, Weed Prevention Plus and Corn Gluten Organic Fertilizer. Check labels carefully before purchase as some products are only labeled for lawns while others are also labeled for flower and vegetable gardens as well as landscaped areas.

Apply before weed germination. For a spring application, apply when the forsythia begins to bloom. Expect a 50 to 60% reduction in target weeds the first year with effectiveness increasing over time with continued use. The product cost more than traditional preemergence herbicides but may be useful to those wishing to avoid synthetic herbicides and fertilizers.

Should You Let Turf Grow Tall in the Fall?

Sometimes you will hear people say to let the grass grow tall right before winter sets in. Their reasoning is that the extra foliage will insulate the crown of the plant from the extreme cold of winter. Although this may sound reasonable, in practice it probably does little, if anything, to increase winter hardiness. On the contrary, a canopy that is too high during the winter may lay over and become matted down, leading to an increased incidence of winter-diseases such as snow mold.

Turfgrass species vary genetically in their cold tolerance, with warm-season grasses such as bermudagrass, zoysiagrass and buffalograss being less cold tolerant than the cool-season types such as tall fescue and Kentucky bluegrass. Given these differences, cold tolerance is improved by increasing the health of the plants going into the winter, and healthy plants are a result of a sound management program (fertilizing, watering and mowing) during the spring, summer and fall.

The lawn will benefit more from continuing to mow at the recommended height than from trying to gain some insulation against winter cold by allowing it to grow tall. Here is a list of the recommended mowing height ranges (in inches) for home lawns in Kansas: Tall fescue 2.5 -3.5; Kentucky bluegrass 2-3; Buffalograss 2-3; Bermudagrass 1-2; Zoysiagrass 1-2
(Note: Mowing at heights below 1.5 inches requires a reel mower).

There may be some benefits gained by adjusting mowing heights WITHIN the recommended range at times. For example, it is a good practice to mow warm-season grasses at the higher end of recommended heights during late summer and early fall because this practice should help them store more carbohydrate reserves for the winter, and it may reduce the incidence of certain cool-weather diseases. But remember to stay within the recommended height range for your species.

Last Tomatoes of the Season

Cold nights are increasing in frequency now that we are into October. If you have tomatoes, you may have some that are approaching maturity. Leave them on the vine until mature or until a frost is forecast. Tomatoes will ripen off the vine but must have reached a certain phase of maturity called the 'mature green stage.' Look for full-sized tomatoes with a white, star-shaped zone on the bottom end of the green fruit. When harvesting fruit before a frost, separate tomatoes into three groups for storage: those that are mostly red, those that are just starting to turn, and those that are still green. Discard tomatoes with defects such as rots or breaks in the skin. Place the tomatoes on cardboard trays or cartons but use layers of newspaper to separate fruit if stacked. Occasionally a tomato may start to rot and leak juice. The newspaper will keep the juice from contacting nearby or underlying fruit. Store groups of tomatoes at as close to 55 degrees as possible until needed.

Peppers from the Garden

Peppers are able to be stored fresh much longer than tomatoes. They can usually keep in a crisper drawer of a refrigerator for several weeks if kept moist but not wet. For longer storage, freezing works well. Though mushy when thawed, the flavor still comes through in cooked foods. Try dicing them into small pieces and then freezing on a cookie sheet. The frozen pieces can then be poured into a plastic bag for later use. Measuring is much easier as the pieces are not frozen together in a clump. This method works equally well for hot peppers.