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TIME TO PLANT POTATOES APPROACHING

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. Seed pieces this size will have more than one eye.

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.

Plants Breaking Dormancy Early

Plants that become dormant in preparation for winter must have a certain number of "chilling hours" before the buds will begin growth the next spring. "Chilling" hours are those in which the temperature remains between 32 and 45 degrees F. Plants differ in the number of chilling hours needed, with those adapted to colder climates usually requiring more than those adapted to warmer zones. Even plants within the same species can differ markedly in the number of chilling hours required for bud break. For example, apple varieties range from a low of 250 (or fewer) chilling hours to a high of 1700. The chilling requirements of some plants have already been met this winter. For these plants, dormancy is over and warm periods can lead to bud swell or even flowering. If spring-flowering bulbs flower now, the floral parts may be damaged by a cold snap but the plants themselves will likely be okay. It all depends on the severity of the cold snap.

So, what do you do if you have a plant that has swollen buds? Actually, there is not much you can do to slow the bud development process because it is completely dependent on weather. However, watering during dry weather may help in an indirect way. Roots can suffer drought damage during the winter. A tree with a damaged root system and damaged buds will be slower to recover than one with just damaged buds. Readily available soil moisture will aid in keeping the plant healthy so it will be better able to recover from cold damage. Also, it is important to determine if the swollen buds are flower buds or leaf buds. Even if the flower buds are killed by cold temperatures, the health of the plant should not be affected. If, in addition to the swollen buds, you also see small buds on the stems, then the swollen buds are flower buds and the small buds are leaf buds. Leaf buds are more hardy than flower buds but even they can be killed if they have lost their winter hardiness. Even if the leaf buds swell and are killed by a cold snap, a healthy tree will still be able to survive. There are secondary buds that remain dormant unless the primary bud is killed. Secondary bud growth may be slower and less vigorous, but the tree will eventually recover.

Cut Back Ornamental Grasses

March is a good time to remove dead foliage from ornamental grasses. Grasses green up earlier if foliage is removed and are more attractive without a mixture of dead and live leaves. A number of tools can be used including hand clippers, weed whips (if the foliage is of a small enough diameter), weed whips with a circular blade, or even a chain saw. Use the top of the chainsaw bar to cut so the saw doesn't pull in debris and clog. Also, it is often helpful to tie foliage together before cutting so it doesn't interfere and is easier to dispose of. Burning is another option - but only if it is safe and legal to do so. Note that these grasses may not burn long, but they burn extremely hot. Even so, the crown of the plant is not damaged and new growth appears relatively quickly. If the center of the clump shows little growth, the plant would benefit from division. Dig up the entire clump and separate. Then replant the vigorous growth found on the outer edge of the clump.

Rhubarb

Rhubarb is a perennial vegetable that can be a bit tricky to grow in Kansas. It is native to northern Asia (possibly Siberia) and so is adapted to cold winters and dry summers. However, it is susceptible to crown rot and should not be subjected to "wet feet" and therefore should be grown in a well-drained soil. The addition of organic matter can increase drainage as well as raise the soil level so that crown rot is less likely. Also, have a soil test done as rhubarb does best with a pH below 7.0. Rhubarb should be planted from mid-March to early April in Kansas. Mix 5 to 10 pounds of well-rotted barnyard manure into the soil for each 10 square feet of bed before planting.

Rhubarb is propagated from crowns (root sections) that contain one or two buds. Plants should be spaced 2 to 3 feet apart in the row with 4 to 5 feet between rows. The crowns are planted shallow so that the buds are just one-half to 1 inch below the soil surface. Firm soil around the crowns and make sure they are not in a depression that holds water. Recommended varieties include Canada Red, Crimson Red, McDonald and Valentine. Rhubarb needs rejuvenated at least every 5 to 10 years and should be dug and divided in the same time period as new plantings are established. Use a cleaver or axe to cut crowns into sections that each contains one or two buds. Plant as described above. Newly transplanted rhubarb should not be harvested the first year so the plant can recover from the transplant process. Only a few stalks should be harvested the second year to allow the plant to continue to build up its energy reserves. The harvest season for plants that are three years or older usually lasts about 8 weeks. Harvest only the largest and best stalks by pulling them slightly to the side so that they break away from the plant. Never harvest over one-third of the leaf stalks at one time. Only the leaf stalk (petiole) is eaten as the leaf blade contains oxalic acid and is poisonous. Mulches can be used to reduce moisture loss, prevent weed growth and provide winter protection. However, it should be pulled away in the spring to allow the soil to warm so that early growth is encouraged.