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## **HOW LOW SHOULD YOU GO?**

We often are 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 more quickly. But the mowing height should be raised to normal after the first or second cutting to discourage crabgrass and encourage deep rooting. Crabgrass seed must have light to germinate, and a high mowing height will help 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 1 to 1½ inches. Be careful you don't go so low that you scalp the turf. After that, raise the mowing height for Kentucky bluegrass to 2 to 3 inches but 3 to 3½ inches for tall fescue. On Bermudagrass and Zoysia you can mow as low as ¾ of an inch, but again - watch for scalping. After that raise your mowing height for Bermudagrass and Zoysia to at least 1 and ½ inches. Warm season grasses like Bermuda and Zoysia will not green up and develop a canopy prior to Crabgrass germination, therefore we recommend using a pre-emergent herbicide for crabgrass control. Pre-emergent herbicides for crabgrass control should be applied in early April.

### ***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 you return and use the average of the two. It is best 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 provide 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.

### ***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 flowers. Male flowers are on the tips of the leaves and look somewhat like a cross between a miniature hand grenade and a pinecone. Shaking the branches on dry days will often result in a cloud of pollen being released. Most junipers are dioecious, meaning they have both male and female plants. About half the junipers (the males) will have this coloration. The female flowers are much less obvious. This is normal and will fade with time.

### ***There Never Used to be Fruit on Ornamental Pears***

The fruit on ornamental pears is quite small; about the size of a marble. However, it can be very messy if it lands on sidewalks or driveways and people squish the fruit when walking or driving. You may have noticed that ornamental pears are producing fruit much more commonly than they have in the past. Why is this so? A little history is needed in order to understand what has happened. Ornamental pears used to be called Bradford pears. This was a bit of a misnomer as 'Bradford' was a specific variety. Ornamental pears were called Bradfords because this was practically the only variety that people planted. Therefore, if you bought an ornamental pear a number of years ago, it was likely a Bradford. All was well and good until people noticed that Bradfords would fall apart after a number of years due to a weak branching structure. Therefore, nurseries started selling "improved" ornamental pears that weren't Bradfords such as 'Aristocrat,' 'Capital,' 'Redspire,' 'Chanticleer' and various other varieties. It was felt that all of these varieties had a stronger branching pattern than 'Bradford' but such may not be the case. Both 'Chanticleer' and 'Redspire' have shown branch breakage. 'Aristocrat' does appear to have better branch angles but more time is needed to make a firm recommendation. Here is the key. Pears usually require cross-pollination in order to fruit. In other words, you must have two different varieties of pear before fruit forms. When all we had were Bradfords, we had no fruit due to a lack of cross pollination. Now that we have such a mixture of varieties, we will get fruit as long as two different varieties of ornamental pears bloom at the same time and are close enough that bees can work between them. This formation of fruit can also lead to a second problem. Volunteer trees can come up from the seed contained in the fruit. Therefore, you may see ornamental pears come up in areas where no one planted them. This has become enough of a problem that several states have added ornamental pears to their invasive plant list. There isn't much homeowners can do about these trees producing fruit. Just be careful to plant in an area so that, if fruit forms, it will not be a nuisance.

### ***Transplant Solutions and Sidedressing***

Transplant solutions are mild fertilizer solutions that are applied to newly transplanted vegetables and flowers. Transplant solutions are also called starter solutions or root stimulators.

Early-season plants not given a transplant solution often develop a purplish tinge to the leaves caused by a phosphorus deficiency. Surprisingly, the soil may have plenty of phosphorus but plants often have difficulty taking up nutrients in cool soils. The starter solution places soluble nutrients near the roots so the plants get off to a good, strong start. Transplant solutions (root stimulators) are available for sale but it is also possible to make your own transplant solution from a fertilizer that contains more phosphorus than nitrogen or potassium such as a 5-10-5, 10-20-10 or 11-15-11. Mix 2 to 3 tablespoons of one of the above fertilizers in a gallon of water several hours before use. The fertilizer won't completely dissolve but enough will go into solution to get plants off to a good start. Use about 1 cup of transplant solution for each transplant. Sidedressing is a fertilization done after the plants are established. A fertilizer containing primarily nitrogen is used to keep plants growing and productive. Ammonium Sulfate (21-0-0) is often used at the rate of 2 & ½ pounds fertilizer per 100 feet of row. More commonly available lawn fertilizers such as a 30-3-3, 29-5-4 or something similar can also be used but cut the rate in half. Be sure any lawn fertilizer used does not contain weed preventers or weed killers. Note that most fertilizers weigh about 1 pound per pint of product.

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