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## **WOOD CHIPS AS MULCH**

With many municipalities and tree service companies having wood chippers now, gardeners often are able to get chips free. We are sometimes asked our opinion about whether these make a good mulch. Some people have heard that these chips will tie up nitrogen so that the garden plants won't grow as well. If wood chips are used as a mulch, there is no cause for concern. However, if the chips are mixed with the soil, there can be a problem during the breakdown process. The microorganisms that break down the chips need a certain amount of nitrogen during the process. With most green material, there is enough nitrogen in the material itself to meet the needs of the microorganisms. However, nitrogen levels in wood chips are so low, the microorganisms must borrow it from the surrounding soil. This results in less nitrogen being available to the plants. However, when the raw organic material has been digested, the microorganisms die and release the nitrogen. Therefore, the nitrogen is not lost but is simply unavailable for plant use for a period of time. Again, this is only a concern if the wood chips are mixed into the soil. There is no problem with nitrogen tie-up if the chips are used as a mulch. However, one point should be kept in mind. These chips can be used by foraging termites as a bridge to homes and other structures. Termites are light and heat sensitive and will not bother the chips themselves if they are 3 inches deep or less. Therefore, watch the depth of these chips near the house or other buildings. Also leave a bare area several inches wide next to the house so that any termite activity is noticeable.

### ***Prop Up Fruit Tree Limbs if Needed***

Heavy fruit loads this season may cause limbs to break if they are not given extra support. As fruits increase in size, the additional weight on individual branches may be substantial. One-inch thick boards can be used to prop up limbs. Here's how. Cut a "V" on the top edge of the board on which the limb will rest so that it doesn't slip off. Long limbs that are heavily loaded with fruit may need a prop in the center and another to support the outer part of the limb. A plastic belt-like material that is about 2 inches wide may also be used. This can be tied to a heavily loaded limb, then to a large diameter limb above for support. Where a large limb is used for support, it is good to have it supporting limbs on opposite sides so the weight is balanced. Another solution is to wrap a tape or belt material around the tree in a spiral to prevent limbs from bending until they break. Heavy twine may be used, but it should be removed when the fruit is picked or soon after so it does not cut into the bark on the limb. Check trees regularly, up to two times a week during the last month the fruit are maturing. You will find additional limbs that need support. Tending to the heavily loaded tree limbs will reduce the number of broken limbs and help keep a balance of the fruiting wood in your tree. Next year, prune long, weak branches back to a side branch to help prevent this problem.

## ***Spring-flowering Plants Blooming at the Wrong Time***

Whenever we have a summer that puts a lot of stress on plants, bloom may appear on ornamentals that normally flower in the spring. This stress is usually caused by hot, dry periods but may be caused by other factors that stress the plant. We have noticed Japanese Kerria blooming now even though it normally blooms in April to May. Don't be surprised if we see more spring-flowering plants blooming as we progress through the growing season. We have seen lilac, ornamental pears, crabapples and various other plants bloom in the fall in previous years. Fall flowering of plants is normally sparse and does not appreciably affect the amount of bloom the following spring.

## ***Bitter Cucumbers***

A bitter taste in cucumbers is the result of stress that can be caused by a number of factors, including heredity, moisture, temperature, soil characteristics, and disease. Most often this occurs during the hot part of the summer or later in the growing season. Two compounds, cucurbitacins B and C, give rise to the bitter taste. Though often only the stem end is affected, at times the entire fruit is bitter. Also, most of the bitter taste is found in and just under the skin. Removing the stem end and the skin can often help salvage bitter fruit. Bitter fruit is not the result of cucumbers cross-pollinating with squash or melons. These plants cannot cross-pollinate with one another. Often newer varieties are less likely to become bitter than older ones. Proper cultural care is also often helpful. Make sure plants have the following:

- Well-drained soil with a pH between 6.0 and 6.5. Plenty of organic matter also helps.
- Mulch. Mulch helps conserve moisture and keeps roots cool during hot, dry weather.
- Adequate water especially during the fruiting season.
- Disease and insect control.

## ***Crabgrass Control***

This is the time of year when people really notice crabgrass infestations. By far the best way to control crabgrass is to prevent it by maintaining a good, thick lawn. Crabgrass is an annual that must come up from seed each year and the seed must have light in order to germinate. If a lawn is thick enough that sunlight does not reach the soil, the crabgrass will not germinate. Under Kansas conditions it is not easy to maintain such a lawn; so many gardeners do the next best thing and apply a crabgrass preventer in the spring. Crabgrass preventers kill the seed as it germinates. Most do not have any effect on crabgrass that has already come up. If we are too late to apply a preventer, we do have other herbicides that will kill crabgrass after it is up including Ortho Weed-B-Gon Max +Crabgrass Control, Fertilome Weed-Out with Crabgrass Control and Bayer Lawn Weed & Crabgrass Killer. Each contains quinclorac, which is a crabgrass herbicide, as well as other active ingredients that control broadleaf weeds. We also have a homeowner formulation of quinclorac under the trade name of Drive that is available from Monterey Lawn and Garden. Quinclorac is an excellent crabgrass killer that controls not only crabgrass but also

has good activity on foxtail and certain broadleaves such as field bindweed, black medic and clover. However, it does little to nothing to goosegrass. Fortunately, crabgrass starts declining about the middle of August. This is about the same time that cool- season grasses such as tall fescue and Kentucky bluegrass start to come out of their summer doldrums. By the first of September, the crabgrass will be less noticeable. Therefore, a small infestation is best ignored. Remember that crabgrass is a warm-season annual and will be killed by the first frost.

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