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ORNAMENTAL GRASSES

When is the best time to cut back ornamental grasses? The definite answer is “it depends”. As a rule, ornamental grasses should not be cut back while green because they need time to move the energy found in the foliage into the roots. Even when browned by cold weather, most gardeners will leave the foliage until spring because of the interest it adds to winter landscapes. Early March is the preferred time to cut back these plants. However, dry foliage is extremely flammable and should be removed in the fall from areas where it is a fire hazard. Another question we often receive is whether we can divide ornamental grasses in the fall. Spring is the preferred time because divisions done in the fall may not root well enough to survive the winter.

Preventing Sunscald on Thin-Barked Trees

Many young, smooth, thin-barked trees such as honeylocusts, fruit trees, ashes, oaks, maples, lindens, and willows are susceptible to sunscald and bark cracks. Sunscald normally develops on the south or southwest side of the tree during late winter. Sunny, warm winter days may heat the bark to relatively high temperatures. Research done in Georgia has shown that the southwest side of the trunk of a peach tree can be 40 degrees warmer than shaded bark. This warming action can cause a loss of cold hardiness of the bark tissue resulting in cells becoming active. These cells then become susceptible to lethal freezing when the temperature drops at night. The damaged bark tissue becomes sunken and discolored in late spring. Damaged bark will eventually crack and slough off. Trees often recover but need TLC - especially watering during dry weather.

If you have seen this type of damage in previous years or fear you have susceptible trees, preventative measures are called for. Applying a light-colored tree wrap from the ground to the start of the first branches can protect young and/or recently planted trees. This should be done in October to November and removed the following March. Failure to remove the tree wrap in the spring can prove detrimental to the tree. Certain species such as maples and lindens should continue to be wrapped until the lower branches extend out far enough to shade its own trunk. Most other trees will only need to be wrapped for the first 2 or 3 years.

Fruit Planting Preparation

If you plan to develop or add to your fruit garden next year, now is a good time to begin preparing the planting site. Grass areas should be tilled so grass does not compete with the fruit plants for soil moisture and nutrients. Bermudagrass should be sprayed with a herbicide now to kill it before next spring. Have the soil analyzed for plant nutrients. Your local K-State Research and Extension agents have information to guide you in taking the soil sample. From that sample, the agent can provide recommendations on what and how much fertilizer to add to correct

nutrient deficiencies. Organic materials such as compost, grass clippings, leaves, hay, straw or dried manure, can be tilled into the soil to help improve its condition. Time and weather conditions generally are more suitable in the fall than in the late winter and spring for preparing soil. If fruit plants can be set by early April, they will have developed a stronger root system to support plant growth than they would if planted later. If there are only a few plants to be planted, consider tarping each planting area to guard against a wet spring delaying planting after plants are shipped and received. Also, fruit tree planting can be done in the fall but plants may need to be watered during the winter if the weather is warm and dry.

It's Pine Wilt Time Again

This is the time of year that we see an increase in pine wilt symptoms. However, this year is worse than normal due to the stress from the extreme drought from late last fall through much of this summer. Though sometimes detected in white pine and Loblolly pine, Scots pine, and to a lesser extent, Austrian pine, are the primary hosts. Needles on affected trees initially turn a dull gray-green. In most cases, the foliage on the entire tree is affected at the same time, although sometimes you will see individual branches affected first. As pine wilt progresses, the needles turn from dull green to brown and remain attached to the tree. The color change normally occurs within a couple of weeks but occasionally may be stretched out over several months. Eventually, the tree dies. This year, we may see pines appear to die from pine wilt but may simply succumb to environmental stress. Regardless, any tree in which the twigs become brittle, is dead. Trees with pine wilt cannot be saved. Any tree suspected of having this disease should be cut at ground level and removed from the site. Do not save the wood for firewood because it serves as a breeding ground for the pine sawyer insect. Diseased trees may be chipped, but compost the chips for several months before using them in the landscape. Currently, there are no chemical controls that will cure pine wilt in an already infected tree. The beetles that carry this disease are attracted to stressed trees. Watering during dry periods can help prevent infections.

Twig Girdlers

We are starting to see damage from twig girdlers as evidenced by fallen twigs up to 3 feet long. The beetle *Oncideres cingulata* is most likely the culprit. Host trees include elm, oak, linden, hackberry, apple, pecan, persimmon, poplar, sour gum, honey locust, dogwood, and some flowering fruit trees. This insect is distributed throughout the eastern United States from New England to Florida and as far west as Kansas and Arizona. Adults are long-horned beetles

with a grayish-brown bodies that are stout and cylindrical. The larvae are also cylindrical with small heads and shiny exteriors. Larvae can be up to an inch long and are light brown to brownish-gray. Girdled twigs often remain on the tree until a strong wind blows them down. Large infestations can result in a high percentage of girdled twigs. Though this may reduce the vigor and appearance of the tree, the overall effect on the tree's health is not severe. Twigs are unsightly and do not fall all at once, so clean up is a drawn out process. This beetle has a one-year life cycle. Late in the growing season, the female deposits eggs in small scars chewed

through the bark and then chews a continuous notch around the twig, girdling it. The notch is cut below the site of egg deposition apparently because the larva is unable to complete development in the presence of large amounts of sap. Girdled twigs die and fall to the ground where the eggs hatch. Girdled twigs look like a beaver has chewed on them, only in miniature. The outside of the twig is smoothly cut, but the center of the twig appears broken. The larvae begin feeding on dead wood inside the twigs the following spring and continue through most of the summer. Pupation takes place inside the feeding cavity. Development is completed during August when the adult emerges to repeat the cycle. Though adults feed on the bark of host twigs, damage is minimal until the female starts girdling. Chemical control is impractical, so gather and dispose of fallen twigs in the fall or spring to destroy the larvae inside. Often, natural mortality is high because fallen twigs are excessively dry or carry too many larvae per twig

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