

Gardening Q&A

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Q. For the first time we have purple martins in our birdhouse. They are amazing to have around the yard, chattering away. They have recently been landing on the ground. Sometimes they are picking up sticks for their nest. Other times, it looks like they are hunting insects? Would hunting insects on the ground be something they would do?

A. I don't think so. As far as I know they rely on flying insects collected in the air for food. I think they are collecting little bits of gravel and mud that they use in nest construction.

Q. If I collect the seed from our naturalized larkspur can I plant it around the yard and pass it on to our son for his garden? They are beautiful and a favorite of the butterflies and hummingbirds in our yard.

A. Collect the seed pods when they reach full size and show the shape of the seed inside and have begun to brown. It works well to cut off the seed pods and place them in a paper sack so that when the pods open, they will be in the sack and easy to store and access. Plant the seed in early fall when we plant the rest of the wildflowers.

Q. Our peaches are starting to ripen. They have good color and size but have what looks like scar tissue with lots of bumps and indentations. We sprayed Neem oil every two weeks after the blooms dropped. Is it insect damage or a disease?

A. The damage sounds like stink bug, probably leaf-footed bug damage. They insert a shot of digestive juice into the peach (and tomatoes) and then feed on the resultant stew! The feeding leaves the wounds and scar tissue you describe. Stink bugs are large and mobile insects, neem oil would not control them. In my experience the two insecticides that work best to control stink bugs are Sevin and malathion. Sevin is no longer readily available. Spray malathion every week to control the pests on your later ripening fruit.

Q. Last year we were buried in acorns from our live oak trees. Is there anyway we can reduce the crop without hurting the trees? They are such a mess to clean up.

A. Perhaps reducing the irrigation you apply to your lawn and trees would reduce the acorn crop over the long term, but I don't know of any reasonable strategy that works to reduce acorn production in the short term. I rely on the deer, squirrels, doves, blue jays and other wildlife to clean up the acorns. They are pretty quick and relatively efficient at the job.

Q. Is there anything we can still plant in the vegetable garden? We are new to gardening and managed to get tomatoes, green beans and summer squash planted. We still have lots of space.

A. There is still time to plant pepper transplants in the garden. Many varieties of hot and mild peppers are available at area nurseries. Also consider planting okra and southern peas by seed.