

Gardening Question and Answer

Distribute 10-29-2010

Q. Our red oak is dropping its leaves but there is no color except for brown etching on some edges. Is there a problem? Should we spray something?

A. Red oaks all over the area are dropping leaves with the coloring you describe. Fall color is dependent on the weather and for many red oak trees the weather has not contributed to the development of fall leaf color. The "etching" is a fungus, but it is a secondary infection, not causing the leaf drop. Trees when they decide to drop their leaves ignore secondary infections because the leaves are no longer necessary for the nutrient processing.

Q. The number of Monarchs that have and are visiting my landscape has been huge. They really favor the tropical milkweed as a nectar source. Do you still recommend that we cut the milkweed back to encourage the Monarchs to migrate south to their wintering site?

A. The pruning the tropical milkweeds back on or about November 1 was a compromise with some naturalists who fear the long-blooming and foliage full milkweeds will encourage the migrants to linger and be caught in the cold weather. There is also some indication that unhealthy microorganism populations accumulate on the tropical milkweed because of their long season. Research is continuing and if you have mistflower, zinnias, porterweed, fall aster, lantana, mint marigold, and other nectar sources, the butterflies should have plenty of nectar from other sources if you decide to cut them back. It is a tough decision!

Q. We just finished building our new raised bed vegetable garden. What can we still plant?

A. By seed plant carrots, turnips, lettuce, rutabagas, beets, mustard, and radishes. Use transplants for spinach, broccoli, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, kale, Chinese cabbage, cabbage, strawberries and kohlrabi.

Q. When is it too late to apply a "winterizer" fertilizer on the lawn? How about a pre-emergent herbicide for winter weeds?

A. It is too late for the pre-emergent herbicide. Rescue grass, dandelions, thistle, and other winter weeds have already emerged. You can apply the fertilizer if the lawn grass is still green. The nitrogen source in the "winterizer" fertilizer is a fast release source. The grass pulls the nutrients and processes them as long as the green foliage is in place and transpiration continues.

Q. What is the advantage of aerating the lawn? When should it be done?

A. Aeration counteracts compaction by providing channels to the roots of the lawn grass through which oxygen, water, and nutrients can penetrate the soil. If you also top dress with compost the channels allow a route for organic material to penetrate the soil. The organic material filters into the aeration channels without blocking them. Organic material decomposes quickly in our soil and climate so top-dressing is one of the few sources of organic material. February is a good time to aerate.