Hort Happenings
January-March 2017

Master Gardeners

The Boone County Master Gardeners will be participating in a new Master Gardener Training Class in March. We will be training potential new members along with Marion and Baxter Counties.

Classes will meet starting February 29 and every Tuesday in March. Cost of the class will be $85, which will include training booklet, nametag and first year’s dues. Classes will run from 8:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m. and will rotate locations between Harrison, Yellville and Mt. Home.

Pruning

Late February to early March is pruning time for many plants. Fruit trees, blueberry bushes, grape vines, roses and ornamental grasses all need to be pruned every year. If you are a commercial grower and have hundreds of plants, you may need to start pruning earlier in the month, but most home gardeners have a handful of plants, and should wait to prune as late in the month as possible. Pruning early exposes your plants more and could lead to winter damage if extremely cold weather were to occur after pruning. Know why you are pruning, how you should be pruning and when to do so. Other plants that benefit from pruning before new growth begins include crape myrtles (don’t murder them), althea or rose of Sharon, butterfly bush, summer spirea, and vitex. With the exception of big leaf hydrangea, oakleaf hydrangea and gardenia, most plants that bloom in the summer, bloom on the new growth and should be pruned before they begin to grow in earnest. Spring bloomers are pruned AFTER they bloom.
Lawn Care

Avoid applying any weed and feed type of application to your lawn. While we do have an ample number of winter weeds growing in our lawns. Weed and feed, includes herbicide and fertilizer. Your lawn is dormant right now so all you would be feeding is winter weeds, and they are doing fine on their own. Many winter weeds were already blooming in December this year, so they are well-established. If you want to combat weeds, use a stand-alone herbicide, and avoid spraying on a windy day. If you just have a few weeds, you might consider hand pulling or keeping them mowed low to prevent blooms and seed set.

We can use herbicides in our lawns at the end of February to March. Make sure that you are using a product that targets the weeds you want to eliminate and remember to always follow the label.

Bulbs

Spring bulbs will be in peak bloom during late February and March. Fertilize them, to make sure they have the nutrition they need for their green growing period following bloom. They replenish their bulbs after flowering, and need a minimum of six weeks of growth before you can cut the foliage off.

Many perennials are up and growing. If you have summer or fall bloomers that need to be divided now is the time to do so. Dig up the clump and use a sharp knife or pruning saw to cut through the root system. Leave at least two to three crowns per division. Share with your friends if you have too many to work with.

Insects

Last year Boone County experienced the worst “invasion” of Japanese Beetles yet. Now is a great time to think about a plan for this summer. Including pheromone traps are a valuable asset in protecting your property, just remember to place the traps away from the vegetation you’re trying to protect.

Vegetables

Start your vegetable seeds at the end of February for cool season crops and warm season crops at the end of April.

Onion sets can go out in March, but never allow the bulbs to freeze. If you do, the finished onion size will never get very large. Also, even if you get your tomatoes out at the end of March they will not grow much as the soil temperatures are not high enough.
Fire Blight

Fire blight is caused by the bacterium *Erwinia amylovora*. This disease can also affect other ornamentals in the Rosaceae family. Some varieties of bearing pear, apple, flowering crabapple, pyracantha, black berry and quince are susceptible. Rose, cotoneaster and hawthorn are also attacked, but to a lesser extent. If warm, humid conditions occur during flowering, disease can develop rapidly. Fire blight usually becomes most apparent during the spring. Heavy fertilization, which promotes rapid, succulent plant growth, increases disease severity.

The symptoms on ornamental trees and shrubs are very similar to those on apple and commercial pear. The first symptoms of disease are the presence of blighted leaves and blossoms near the twig tips. Leaves wilt and rapidly turn dark brown. Twig tips appear as if they were scorched by fire or damaged by frost and may be randomly distributed throughout the tree. Twigs become blackened as the disease progresses downward toward larger stems, and affected leaves tend to cling to the branches. Twig tips may also develop a “shepherd’s crook”, which is useful in disease diagnosis. Stem lesions develop a sunken appearance with small cracks at the margins. Disease severity is directly related to the cultivar and weather conditions at the time of infection. Significant dieback may occur on highly susceptible cultivars. Susceptible plants may be severely affected by repeated infections by the bacterium.

The disease cycle begins in the spring with the infection of blossoms or shoots, providing a future source of the bacteria in “holdover cankers” on infected plants. During wet weather in the early spring, bacteria ooze from these cankers and attract insects that spread the bacteria to other susceptible plants or plant parts. The bacteria are commonly carried to the blossoms, fruit, shoots and leaves by flying or crawling insects, including honeybees. Overhead water can also be an important method of spread. Secondary spread of the bacterium may occur by insects, birds and people using contaminated pruning tools. This infection process continues throughout the summer and into the fall. As outside temperature drops, bacterial infections slow down. Accurate disease diagnosis of affected tissue becomes difficult during the dormant season.

Growing resistant varieties should be the first priority in preventing or managing fire blight. For landscape trees, diseased wood should be pruned during the dormant season or during an extended dry period when the bacterium is not as active. Wood should be removed 8-10 inches below the edge of the sunken cankers. Pruning equipment should be sanitized with either a 10 percent household bleach solution or a 70 percent alcohol solution following each cut. These solutions will help prevent spreading the bacterium. To avoid rapid susceptible plant growth, it is best to lightly fertilize during the fall rather than the spring. Soil conditions and nutrition affect tree susceptibility. Trees grown in poorly drained sites with low pH values tend to be more susceptible to fire blight. Fertilization regimes should be based on a regular soil test.

In the home landscape, resistant cultivars and selective pruning are the best methods of control for ornamental pears and other woody ornamentals. Chemical control is usually not successful since timing and coverage are very important for control. In commercial operations, copper materials applied during the dormant season followed by regular spray applications of streptomycin beginning at bloom have successfully managed the disease.

Sincerely,

Mike McClintock
County Extension Agent - Agriculture