I have a row of red tipped photinia beside my driveway. They were excellent screening bushes several years ago, but now they've gotten so tall, all the bushy leafy growth is way up high, and they are more stalk-like from eye level down. I would like to cut them back so they'll bush out nearer to the ground and function once again as a screening hedge. How severely can I cut them back without harming them? Will that accomplish what I want? How long will it take for them to fill back in? What's the best way to fertilize them?

Red top photinia were the main hedge plant in the south for years, but entomosporium leaf spot has been thinning out the population for over twenty years. The disease has a purple to red spot filled with a gray center. Some existing plants do not have the disease, but that can change. If they did not have disease issues, I would say cut away as much as you want up to half of the plant, since they will fill back in and thicken up nicely. As new growth begins, make sure that the top of the hedges always stays a bit narrower than the base to allow sunlight to get to all parts of the plant ensuring foliage throughout. The downside with a photinia is that rapid, tender new growth (which is encouraged by severe pruning) can be more sensitive to the disease, so be aware of that. If you have any plants with the disease—, you can spread the disease mechanically with your pruning shears, so pay attention to the plants you are pruning. If disease is not a factor, they will fill back in quickly. Broadcast a light application of fertilizer around the plants and water it in when done pruning.

Would you please identify the tiny yellow wild flower that is growing in every field you pass? They appear every spring before farmers plow their fields.

Those same farmers wish they didn't have those tiny yellow flowers—which are buttercups. The plants are poisonous to livestock if eaten fresh, and they actually are a weed in our fields. They are also considered a wildflower—albeit invasive. The story goes, if you hold a plant under your chin and it reflects up yellow, then you like butter—if it is sunny you will probably like butter, since the shiny flower reflects light well—if it is cloudy, you won't be considered a butter fan!

I am on the horns of a dilemma. Last fall I planted a hundred crocus bulbs in a small garden area of our yard. They bloomed beautifully early this spring, but then came the problem. I know that I should not cut the foliage back until it begins to die back, but I've got white clover that is almost knee high in the area that is beginning to be very unsightly. Must I wait until June or so for mowing to protect the crocus? And what should or can I do to prevent this problem from happening next year without destroying the crocus and other bulbs in the area?

Crocus only need to have green healthy foliage for six weeks following bloom. If they bloomed early, I would say you have satisfied their foliage requirement and you can mow and cut back the white clover as well. The crocus should come back strong next year, but the clover will too, unless you can get it out of the garden. Once the crocus foliage is truly dead and gone, if you have any lingering clover, you could spot spray with glyphosate (roundup), but don't get
any on the crocus foliage. Getting the area free of weeds and then mulching can help, but winter weeds were awful this year.

Q When and how is best to plant zinnia seeds?

A Normally I would say May 1 you could scatter seeds in a sunny place in the garden, but it has been so cool, you may want to wait a couple of weeks. Zinnias grow rapidly from seed, and if warm enough you can have flowers in as little as 40 days