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24 April 22 PSAs

Arbor Day is the last Friday of April in Nebraska. If selecting a tree to plant, look for something that is different than other trees planted in the neighborhood. Diversity in tree species is key to a healthy community forest; and to reducing the risk of trees developing serious disease or insect issues. Another point when selecting a shade tree is not to focus on a fast-growing tree. Fast growing trees tend to be weaker wooded and sometimes brittle, increasing the risk of storm damage. And keep in mind many trees considered to be slow growing will grow faster if we don't start with too large of a tree, the tree is planted correctly which is mostly not too deep; and the tree is watered correctly during its early growing seasons. Do not fertilize trees at planting. For a list of good to great trees for Nebraska, which also lists trees to avoid, call the Nebraska Extension office in Columbus at 402-563-4901.

Garter snakes can be seen in groups during spring. They mate after emerging from hibernation, which for snakes is called brumation, and this occurs when the ground begins to thaw. Males emerge first and wander around to locate a female. When temperatures begin to rise above freezing during the day, females emerge and release a pheromone scent that attracts every male snake of that species in the area. A grouping of snakes in lawns, gardens, and on rock walls comprise one female and maybe a dozen males. Once mated, females wander off to hide and feed, and males return to their original location. Female garter snakes then give birth to 12 to 20 young in late summer. There is only one mating and one litter per year. In the fall, clusters of young snakes can be found in gardens, where ant nests with eggs are common. Snakes feed on many insects and rodents are beneficial, although maybe scary, to have around.

When planting strawberry plants, plant as early as possible which is usually in April in Nebraska. Before planting, remove all but two or three well-developed leaves per plant, and clip off any visible flower clusters. As plants grow, continue to remove all flowers during the first year. New plants, called mother plants, have limited energy reserves which need to go towards establishing the mother plant, and for the mother plant to produce daughter plants during the season. If fruit is allowed to grow the first year of planting, the amount of fruit produced the second year will be reduced due to smaller, weaker daughter plants being produced. It is the daughter plants produced off mother plants that bear the most fruit the next season. After planting into a weed-free bed, mulch to control weeds and conserve moisture. A water-soluble fertilizer can be applied to individual plants as they are planted or soon after.

When and how to prune Hydrangea depends on the type of Hydrangea and the age of wood it blooms on. Smooth Hydrangeas bloom on new or current year's growth with last year's stems dying. Smooth hydrangeas are cut near the ground in fall or spring, just before new growth begins. Panicle Hydrangeas also bloom on new wood but their hardier stems do not die back. In spring, cut these to three to four feet tall or near the ground. Oakleaf hydrangeas also bloom on new wood but this shrub will not flower if terminal buds are removed or winter killed; so only prune dead wood or crisscrossing branches in late spring. Bigleaf hydrangeas bloom on last year's wood. Do not prune these from late fall through spring or early summer flowering will be prevented. Prune Bigleaf Hydrangeas just after they bloom to remove dead wood or to shape. If you prune Hydrangea at the wrong time, the shrub will survive, just not bloom.

With drought conditions continuing and weird winter weather, tree owners are concerned about their trees and have asked "If a tree has not leafed out yet, is this a concern?". It's too early to be concerned about trees and shrubs not leafing. While we know trees are drought stressed, and the warm weather we had this winter was hard on trees, especially evergreens; most trees will leaf out. Trees are just beginning to leaf out; but if a tree has no leaves by June 1, this is a sign it has died. Even if green tissue can be seen when scraping the bark or branches, a tree or shrub that does not leaf out by June 1 is unlikely to survive. There is not much to do but wait and in see. In the meantime, provide a deep watering of 8 to 12 inches when the soil near trees is dry, avoid heavy pruning on stressed trees, and do not fertilize trees, especially those growing in a lawn already being fertilized. Trees use this fertilizer as well and additional N is not needed.