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20 November 9 PSAs

Dead leaves are clinging to trees and shrubs. While this occurs every year with oaks and a few other types of trees, we are seeing it in trees that normally do not do this, such as maples. This is called marcescence which means retention of dead plant parts that are normally shed. In shade trees, as fall weather turns cooler and days shorten, cells at the point of attachment between leaves and twigs begin to form an abscission layer. Once developed, the abscission layer is what causes leaves to drop off. Sometimes, early cold weather, frosts or other odd weather interrupts the abscission process; or kills leaves quickly before the breakaway cell layer forms. Without an abscission layer, leaves cling to trees and shrubs instead of dropping. When leaves don't drop off through the abscission process, winter snow and winds will knock them off or, as growth begins next spring, the old leaves will be pushed off by the new leaves.

As trees drop leaves, Extension is asked if leaves can be spread on perennial flower beds and vegetable gardens. The answer is yes, but there is an exception when it comes to perennial flowers. On vegetable gardens, a layer of trees leaves will protect soil over winter, suppress fall weeds, promote beneficial critters like earthworms and pollinators, and eventually improve soil structure as they decompose. In perennial flower beds, they do the same things as well as providing winter protection. But be aware that a leaf layer can promote plant pests, like slugs; and a very matted leaf layer may hold too much moisture around the crowns of perennials susceptible to crown rots. The benefits of leaving leaves around ornamentals outweighs the disadvantages and is encouraged; but it might be best to keep them away from slug favorites like Hosta. And don't forget, on lawns, leaves can simply be mowed into the grass.

With a warmer than average November, and maybe some extra time on our hands due to Covid, a good task for fruit growers is gathering fruit still hanging in trees or rotting on the ground and get it away from fruit trees. Also rake up and remove leaves gathering beneath the tree. This can help reduce diseases and pests such as apple scab and codling moth next year. While fall sanitation or clean up, does not control fruit tree pests completely, it can help reduce how severe these problems become. Fungal diseases overwinter on fallen leaves as well as fruit. And, while chances are that codling moth has already emerged from fallen fruit to overwinter in cocoons in protected locations, maybe some haven't. Sanitation to reduce overwintering insects works better if fruit is collected and discarded as it drops from trees; however, this task may still be worth the effort and fall sanitation can provide other benefits.

Herb gardening and cooking with fresh herbs has increased in popularity; so why not grow herbs indoors all winter. Some herbs are easy to grow indoors, and can be more flavorful while saving money. Pre-cut herbs sold in plastic containers can be expensive. By growing your own, multiple meals can come out of a single plant for less cost. Some of the easiest herbs to grow from seed are chives, cilantro and basil. Others can be grown indoors but starting them from seed is slow, so start off with transplants instead. As with any potted plant, use containers with drainage holes and use a potting mix in place of topsoil so it is well drained. Ten inch pots are ideal, and smaller ones can be used. A south window is ideal; but grow herbs near the brightest window possible. Keep the soil uniformly moist and fertilize with a water-soluble fertilizer only about once every six months, following label directions for diluting the fertilizer.

When home gardeners buy containers of weed killers and insecticides, they often only use small amounts of the chemicals each season and need to store these product. A common question asked is how long will pesticides last? On length of storage, Cornell University conducted a study in which all pesticide companies contacted recommended not storing pesticides longer than two years, and to store them below 100 degrees and above 40 degrees. You might be thinking "I've had containers of pesticides in my garage for much longer than that". Since there are not easy ways to safely dispose of pesticides, using them according to label direction is the best route to go. In the future, avoid buying pesticides before positively identifying the plant issue and knowing if a pesticide is even needed. If so, purchase them in the smallest sized containers as possible; and always read and follow label directions for safe storage.