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Ordering Potatoes and Disease Prevention

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If you try to order seed potatoes and find the company cannot ship potatoes to Nebraska; try another company or plan to purchase locally. The reason the company cannot ship to Nebraska is likely based on where their seed potatoes originate from.

There is a quarantine on seed potatoes from certain states due to the Columbia root knot nematode. Either the company obtains its seed potatoes from one of those states, or they may have decided it is more feasible to not ship potatoes to certain states rather than sort out what can and cannot be shipped where.

On-line ordering is often the route taken when a specific variety of potato or other vegetable is needed and cannot be purchased locally. If this is the situation, check with other seed companies to see if they will ship to Nebraska.

As always, use certified disease free seed potatoes rather than using potatoes saved from your own garden or someone else's garden. This helps reduce disease issues. And potatoes from a grocery store produce section should not be used. Many have been treated to reduce sprouting.

Some diseases, once introduced into the garden, can remain in the soil for a number of years to cause infections each year. Preventing their introduction is a key step to managing disease.

As you plan the vegetable garden on paper, keep in mind crop rotation. This is another way to reduce disease issues in the garden.

For crop rotation to be most effective, rotation needs to be between vegetable families and ideally, a three year rotation works best. This is not easy to achieve in smaller home gardens, but annual rotation is better than nothing.

Vegetables from the same family are susceptible to the same diseases. Crops in the cucurbit family, such as cucumbers, melons, and squash, are related and should not be planted in the same location or follow one another in the same location each year.

Other vegetable families include the nightshade family of tomatoes, potatoes and eggplant. The cruciferous family includes broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage and kohlrabi. And some root crops like carrots and parsnips are related.

If you have an ongoing disease problem with one or two vegetables that you haven't been able to manage, it might be wise to avoid growing that crop for a few years and try something new.

Another way to manage garden diseases is selecting disease resistant varieties or cultivars. These will be labeled as such in garden catalogs, on seed packages, or on transplant tags. Finding and planting resistant varieties is worth the effort.

Other ways to manage garden diseases, to make plans for now, include staking or caging taller plants like tomatoes. Keeping the foliage out of contact with the soil and increasing air circulation around plants decreases the risk of infection.

When planting, allow enough spacing to allow for good air circulation and control weeds to also improve air movement. It is also important to thin crops to the recommended spacing after they emerge.

If overhead irrigation is used, consider changing to a drip irrigation system if feasible. If not, irrigate in the morning and not in the evenings. Foliage dries off quicker and pathogens have less chance to cause infection.

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Rabbit damage to trees is becoming noticeable. Damage often shows up in mid-winter when other food sources are not available or covered by snow. Once rabbit damage occurs, a question asked is will the tree survive. The general rule-of-thumb is if more than 2/3s of the bark has been removed from around the lower stem or trunk, the tree is likely to die, since food produced by leaves during summer will not be able to reach the roots, and water taken up by roots will not reach the leaves due to girdling damage. If damage is less than 1/3 the way around the trunk, most likely a healthy tree will survive. The tree should seal the wound and wound wood should eventually close the wound. If rabbit damage is occurring, it's not too late to protect the trunk from further damage with a ring of hardware cloth used as a physical barrier. Rabbit repellants can also be applied but need to be reapplied as recommended to be effective.

Recently, a person shared with me that it was too bad ash trees were being cut down and removed when they were still healthy. I shared this was a proactive course of action towns, cities and homeowners were taking to avoid larger issues down the road. Since the majority of untreated ash trees will eventually be killed by emerald ash borer, it is recommended, especially for public entities, to gradually remove them rather than wait until they are killed by the borer. This makes sense economically and safety wise. Standing dead ash trees are a safety hazard and waiting until streets are lined with dead trees before starting removals would overwhelm city resources and become a public hazard. It is therefore a wise practice to begin removal of ash trees even if the borer has not yet been found in or near the community. This also provides the opportunity to begin replacement of shade trees that much sooner.

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If heavy snow or ice has broken branches in a deciduous or evergreen shrub, it is fine to remove broken branches at any time rather than waiting until the ideal time to prune. Once the best time to prune arrives, additional pruning may be needed to correct issues or do some shaping for appearance. When is the ideal time? For trees and shrubs, this is very late winter or early spring. The closer to the plant starting growth but while it is still dormant is the ideal time to prune. If a shrub is a spring blooming shrub, then wait until after blooming to avoid removing flowers. If a spring blooming shrub has major damage and the shrub needs to be pruned near the ground, then do this while the plant is still dormant and skip blooming for this year. On evergreens, know that if a branch has to be pruned back to where there is no green growth on the branch, that branch will not recover and it will be best to remove the entire branch.

Insect borers damage trees by tunneling and feeding just beneath the bark of the trunk and large branches. This tunneling decreases movement of water and food within the tree, causing branch dieback or tree death. Most insect borers are attracted only to trees that are stressed, such as by drought conditions we had this past summer. Once inside a tree, borers are difficult to control and the issue may not be noticed until after too much damage occurs for the tree to recover. The best prevention against insect borers is to reduce tree stress and plant trees less susceptible to borers in locations they are adapted. As planning takes place for tree planting this spring, know some common trees and shrubs most susceptible to borers are white birch, green ash, peach, and poplar. Avoid planting these trees. Select hardier shade trees such as oaks, black maple, Kentucky coffeetree, hybrid elms, black cherry and Hickory.