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Fruit producing plants have an important stage when nitrogen is most beneficial to production. For strawberries, early to mid-August is the time to fertilize to increase fruit production next spring. From June through August, new runners, or daughter plants, are being produced. As day length shortens and temperatures grow cooler in September and October, fruit buds for the next year's crop are developed. It is important for strawberry plants to be vigorous during this period; and nitrogen applied now will promote vigor and fruit bud development. A general rate is ½ to ¾ pound of actual nitrogen per 100 feet of row. The nitrogen may be in the form of a mixture such as a 12-12-12, or in a fertilizer containing nitrogen only such as urea or ammonium nitrate. After spreading the fertilizer, water the area with at least one-half inch of water to move nitrogen into the root area. (Source: K-State, Ward Upham)

The ideal time to seed Kentucky bluegrass and tall fescue lawns is approaching. Late August into early September is the best time to establish new lawns or over-seed a thinning lawn with cool season grasses. Purchase certified seed from a reputable retailer. It is not much more expensive and the extra cost will more than pay for itself. Seedbed preparation, even with over-seeding, is important. If a new lawn is being seeded, such as a new construction, improve soil with compost and use tillage to relieve construction compaction. If an older lawn is being renovated, vigorous power raking and core aeration of the old turf will improve seed to soil contact; and leaving established sod in place will help control weeds. If perennial weeds are a major issue, glyphosate, such as Roundup, can be applied two or more weeks prior to seeding; followed by power raking, and then seeding. (kfeehan2@unl.edu)

Cracks in tomato fruit near the stem are called growth cracks. Fruit cracking is a common problem on tomatoes. Growth cracks usually appear at the top or stem end of the fruit. Cracks radiate out from the stem or circle the fruit in concentric rings. Fruit cracking is associated with wide fluctuations in soil moisture levels. A heavy rain or deep watering after a dry period results in rapid water uptake by tomato plants. The sudden uptake of water results in cracking of ripening fruit. Generally, fruit cracking is most common on large, beefsteak-type tomatoes. Growth cracks can be prevented by providing tomato plants with a uniform supply of moisture during the summer months. Also conserve soil moisture by mulching the area around tomato plants with dried grass clippings, straw, shredded leaves, or other materials. Keep track of varieties and avoid those with severe growth cracks on many fruits.

There is a myth that says if the green tops of onions are stepped on and bent over, the plant's energy will go into enlarging the bulb. There is a major problem with this myth. All of a plant's energy comes from photosynthesis that occurs in green leaves. Once onion tops or leaves are broken and begin to die, photosynthesis decreases or stops; and bulb growth slows or stops. Breaking onion tops also creates a wound, leading to onions rotting in storage. For onions you plan to store, wait until most of the green tops have naturally fallen over and begun to dry before harvesting. After harvest, dry or cure onions in a warm, dry, ventilated area such as a garage or shed. Once the onion tops and necks are dry and the outer scales are brown and dry, store onions in a cool, moderately dry location. Bruised or damaged onions should be used quickly and not stored as this increases the risk of rotting in storage.

It's that time of year when the leaves of some trees and shrubs begin to look tattered, off-color, or start to drop off. Imagine if you stood outside all summer how you might look. While tattered or off-colored leaves and leaf drop causes concern for a tree or shrub, in most cases the issue is only cosmetic and the tree or shrub will be fine. This is especially true of deciduous trees and shrubs that drop their leaves for winter. When any plant exhibits symptoms, before doing anything, positively identify the cause. Is it a pest or environmental like wind tatter or heat stress? Stand back and look at the tree or shrub. Is there still a good amount of green leafy tissue? If so, photosynthesis is taking place and the leaves are doing their job of food production. Even if the issue might be a pest that justifies control, this late in the season there is little that can be done and control measures are best left until next season.

VEGGIE GARDEN MYTHS

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Vegetable garden harvest is well underway. This is when I hear questions that remind me there are still a lot of myths out there in need of debunking.

These myths range from breaking over the tops of onions to spraying tomatoes with calcium, not watering in the heat of day, cross pollination beliefs, and the idea organic pesticides are completely safe.

The belief that breaking green onion tops will cause all of the plant's energy to go into enlarging the bulb is a myth. All of a plant's energy comes from photosynthesis that occurs in green leaves. Once onion tops or leaves begin to die, photosynthesis decreases or stops along with bulb growth. Breaking onion tops also creates a wound, leading to storage rots. For onions you plan to store, allow the tops to die naturally.

The idea that spraying calcium on tomato plants will stop the fruit from developing blossom end rot is a myth. It is true that the brown, leathery rot on the bottoms of tomatoes, peppers, summer squash and other fruits is due to a lack of calcium. However, it is a lack of a calcium in the fruit; not in the plant or soil.

For calcium to move efficiently into and throughout a plant, a consistent moisture supply is needed. The most common cause of blossom end rot is a lack of uniform moisture. Also know that the skin of the fruit is not able to directly absorb foliar-applied calcium, making foliar calcium sprays ineffective.

The best way to prevent blossom end rot is to maintain uniform soil moisture. In other words, avoid letting soil dry out completely between watering. To reduce moisture evaporation from soil, use a layer of mulch like dry grass clippings over the soil. Avoid damaging roots by hoeing or tilling near plants, as this reduces their ability to take up water.

There is a myth that leaves will sunburn if they have water droplets on them so watering during the heat of the day is bad. If it's hot and a plant needs water, go ahead and water to avoid moisture stress. During the heat of the day is not an efficient time to water, but it will not harm plants any more than a sudden daytime rainstorm would.

Every now and then, an odd looking fruit or two is produced in the garden. This is when gardeners might think cross pollination occurred and the odd fruit is a result. First, only plants related to one another can cross pollinate. For example, pollen from pumpkins can pollinate some types of winter squash.

When cross pollination occurs, it only affects the genetics of the seed, not the current year's fruit. The only way an odd fruit might appear is if the seed is saved and planted next year. In many cases, odd shaped or colored fruit is due to environmental conditions such as heat or drought stress, or from volunteer seed left the previous year.

There are a number of lower risk or organic pesticides on the market. Keep in mind that because something is labeled as natural or organic does not mean it is completely safe for people, pets, or beneficial insects. Always read and follow label directions for all pesticides, organic or synthetic.

For example, insecticidal soap is a safe, effective organic insecticide that has minimal negative impact on the environment and many beneficial insects. In contrast, the insecticide pyrethrum, derived from chrysanthemums, is also organic and natural, yet it can be toxic to some beneficial insects, as well as humans and animals, if not used correctly.