

Myth or Fact

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Spring arrives and out comes many plant myths. These seem to get handed down from generation to generation and social media now promotes many of them. Here are a few common myths and the facts.

I was recently asked how much lime needs to be added to soil where an evergreen had been growing and grass will now be planted. Chances are almost 100 percent that no lime needs to be used. And if used, it may eventually harm the grass.

There are two myths addressed here. It is a myth that evergreens make soil too acid. And lime is an amendment that should not be incorporated into soil without testing at a soils lab first. Home soil tests will indicate if a pH is acid or alkaline, but not how acid or how alkaline.

While evergreen needles tend to be acid, they have no or very little effect on soil pH. I wish they did. The pH of landscape soils in Nebraska tend to be only slightly acid to often alkaline. Since most plants prefer a slightly acid soil, it is best not to raise pH any higher than it already tends to be.

Lime raises pH, making it less acid or more alkaline. If soil already has a fairly high pH of 6.6 or higher, the addition of lime can make it even less ideal for plant growth. In Nebraska, the addition of sulfur to lower pH is more often needed in landscape settings. But even with sulfur, it is best to have a soil test done to determine how much sulfur to incorporate.

And know that if either sulfur or lime is found to be needed, it typically takes pounds of product and at least one year to have an effect on soil pH. And the change will not be permanent.

If you have ants crawling on your peony buds, they are not helping the peony bloom. They are simply feeding on a sugary exudate from the buds. Ants might interfere with or help control other insects that feed on buds and so benefit peonies in that way, but otherwise peonies do not need ants.

If someone told you not to eat rhubarb because of our last frost, this is a myth. As long as a freeze does not cause rhubarb leaves and stems to collapse, and the stems remain firm, go ahead and harvest and enjoy eating rhubarb. The leaves always contain poisonous toxins so don't taste or eat rhubarb leaves.

If you've heard that applying Epsom salts to peppers will produce more and better peppers; this is very unlikely to happen. Epsom salts is a source of magnesium which vegetables need; however, most soils have plenty of magnesium. Epsom salts could make a soil more sodic and cause other growth issues. Incorporating compost into a garden each fall will provide much greater benefits.

If you see a product that says it will loosen hard soil, learn more about it. Gypsum is often advertised for this purpose; however, gypsum only works under very specific soil conditions that are rarely found in Nebraska. Save your money and leave gypsum and other so called soil conditioners on the shelf.

The best way to improve a hard or compacted clay soil is with the addition of organic matter. This is another good reason to spend about twenty dollars to have a soil test taken at a soils lab. To determine what percentage of organic matter a soil has. Ideally, it should be around five percent. In my experience, the percentage tends to be around one to two percent which is too low.

Organic matter, like compost or well-rotted manure, helps to build soil structure which makes a soil more friable or workable and better drained. Organic matter also breaks down and increases the nutrient content of soil. And because it decomposes, organic matter needs to be incorporated on a regular basis.