

# Gardening/Horticulture Newsletter March 2008

## Topics:

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Irish Potatoes

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Ahead

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Now

## LAWN WEED CONTROL

Winter broadleaf weeds and wild garlic can be controlled in lawns with one of the two- or three-way mixes (these are various combinations of 2,4-D, dicamba, mecoprop, and dichlorprop). These products often have the name Trimec somewhere on the label. Follow the application rates on the label.

Tough weeds such as henbit may require two applications. It will take three applications over 18 months to adequately control wild garlic. Timing would be December, March and again the following December.

Roundup (glyphosate) can be used to control annual bluegrass, if bermudagrass is completely dormant. Roundup cannot be used on zoysiagrass because it is rarely completely dormant.

Preemergence applications for annual bluegrass should be made in early September using prodiamine, benefin or dithiopyr. It is time to start thinking about preemergence applications for crabgrass control. The same products named above can be used (and there are others) for crabgrass control. Apply the preemergence for crabgrass from mid to late March. Make a second application two months later for full season control.

Later in the season, broadleaves and grasses can be controlled with various postemergence products. Be sure to read and follow label directions for any product you use.

## IRISH POTATOES

Irish potatoes need to be planted soon enough to give the tubers time to mature before hot weather arrives. Generally that is about March 1 to April 1 depending on the weather. Irish potatoes are frost resistant, but a freeze will do them in. you can give them some freeze protection by planting 3 to 4 inches deep.

There are several types of Irish potatoes to choose from. There are the old standards such as Kennebec, Irish Cobbler, Pontiac and Superior, which are white-flesh types. You can also choose a yellow- or gold-fleshed type such as Yukon Gold or a blue-fleshed type such as All Blue. All are Irish potatoes although they are not actually Irish. The "Irish" moniker dates back to the Potato Famine of the 1830's.

Irish potatoes are started from seed pieces - either small whole potatoes or potatoes cut into 1.5 to 2-ounce pieces. Plant the pieces soon after cutting. Be sure there are at least two good eyes on each piece. It is best to use small, whole certified seed potatoes.

The seed pieces should be planted 10 to 12 inches apart and covered in a furrow 3 to 4 inches deep. Space rows 24 to 36 inches apart. The 24-inch spacing will allow the plants to shade the soil and prevent high soil temperatures from inhibiting tuber development. Potatoes should be grown in fertile, well drained soil. Clay soils need to be improved with organic matter and plowed in the fall. Organic mulch, after the plants emerge, helps conserve moisture, suppress weeds and helps keep the soil cooler. Rows of early potatoes can be covered with clean plastic to warm the soil and promote early growth. The film should be removed when plants emerge.

When potatoes break the surface, gradually build up a low ridge of loose soil by cultivating and hoeing. This ridge, which can reach 4 to 6 inches by summer, helps prevent having sunburned (green) tubers. Irrigate if necessary to ensure uniform moisture during tuber development. Harvest when tubers are big enough to eat and some of the vines have died. When digging potatoes, leave them exposed to the sun just long enough for the soil to dry. Clean off the soil by hand - don't wash or you'll promote bacterial rot and handle the tubers as gently as possible.

### THINGS TO DO

- Prune grape vines, blueberry plants, fig trees and fruit trees. These should be pruned while dormant. Peaches can be pruned while blooming.
- Pull or spray winter weeds before they bloom and make a seed crop.
- Prune crepe myrtles, buddleias, summer blooming spireas, and bush-type roses.
- Over wintering tropicals should be sheared back.
- Cut back and divide ornamental grasses.
- Start seeds indoors for tomatoes, peppers, and eggplants.
- Watch for frost and protect plants as needed.
- Plant cool season vegetables - potatoes, turnips, lettuce, spinach, kale. Set out transplants of cabbage, broccoli, and cauliflower. Start planting sweet corn later in the month.
- Set out onion plants or onion sets.
- Cut back lirioppe (monkey grass) and other ornamental grasses before new growth begins.
- Divide summer and fall blooming perennials.
- Start Caladiums indoors for planting outside in May.
- Apply pre-emergent herbicide to lawn if needed to control weeds from mid to late March.
- Allow bulbs 6 weeks of growth after bloom.
- Plant pansies and violas.

## **MARCH MEANS SPRING AHEAD**

March is one of the busiest gardening months of the year, and also one of the most fickle. It could still freeze, since average last freeze is around April 10, for the northern half and April 20 for the southern half of Baxter County, and yet it still could be very balmy and pleasant most of the month. Freezing weather mainly affects the timing of planting cold-sensitive plants, like tomatoes or begonias. If you decide to take chances with tender plants, be prepared to give them a protective covering.

March is a great month to plant almost every kind of landscape plant. The sooner you plant, the quicker the plant will start getting established. This is important if the plants are to do well through the hot, stressful summer. Nurseries are receiving shipments of fresh nursery stock, and this is prime time to buy and plant.

Caladium bulbs require warm soil temperatures, and setting them out in early spring can cause them to rot. Purchase them as soon as they are available, but wait until the soil temperature reaches 70 degrees to plant them.

Periwinkles, or vinca, are a bedding plant, which also loves hot weather. But when set out before the days turn truly hot, they often get a fungal disease that can destroy a whole bed. Mild, wet, spring weather provides the perfect environment for this devastating disease, which, unfortunately, has discouraged many gardeners from planting them altogether. Periwinkle is still a great bedding plant for summer color - just wait until May or early June to plant them.

## **SAPSUCKERS**

The shallow holes in neat, straight lines around and up and down certain tree trunks are the result of a small woodpecker known as a sapsucker. These holes usually do not seem to harm the tree. They seem to like some trees better than others and you may see some trees pecked from the ground to the top and even the big limbs. Some trees will "bleed" from these holes, especially this time of year when the sap is rising.

## **SUMMER BLOOMERS SHOULD BE PRUNED NOW**

Summer-blooming plants such as crepe myrtles and altheas should be pruned in late February or early March, prior to spring growth. The reason we prune at this time, instead of the fall, is to avoid winter injury. Also, you don't have to look at cut landscape plants all winter long.

You can prune back these plants before growth begins because they bloom on the current season's growth.

Crepe myrtles and altheas (Rose of Sharon) can be pruned almost any way you like. For dwarf crepe myrtles, prune the branches back to the ground each year. Many people top their standard crepe myrtles every year to a height of 5-6 feet. You do get bigger branches, but you lose the tree effect.

Remember, every place you make a pruning cut, you'll get a bunch of branches. You'll end up with a very densely branched, densely foliated tree with large flower heads that often fall over because they're on weak wood.

Some prefer to select five to seven main branches, prune out everything else and tip back any stems smaller in diameter than a pencil. If you have a standard crepe myrtle, you can get a nice tree out of it. A crepe myrtle has a nice exfoliating bark, so it's pretty in the winter. The flower heads may not be as large, but you'll get more of them. You're going to have a much better balanced tree.

You don't have to prune crepe myrtles at all if you like their size and shape. And it's an old wives' tale that you have to remove the seed pods. They'll fall off naturally, and the plant will do fine.

Just about anything goes with altheas. If you want a small plant, shear it back. If you like it tall, leave it alone.

You're not going to hurt your altheas' blooming ability by pruning them now.

If you have questions regarding any of the above topics, please feel free to contact me at the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture Baxter County Extension office at 425-2335.

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