

GARDENING/HORTICULTURE NEWSLETTER

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DON'T PUT AWAY THAT GARDEN HOSE YET!

The dry weather this winter and warm temperatures may spell trouble for some young trees and shrubs in the landscape.

This is a serious and unprecedented situation. Evergreen plants are losing significant water from their leaves and there's little available water in the soil.

The situation endangers shrubs and trees, mainly planted in the fall. The priority is young evergreen plants with either needles or broadleaves.

Included in this group are evergreen azaleas, hollies, boxwoods, Leyland cypress, and junipers.

We're encouraging people to get out as soon as possible and water any kind of evergreen whether they are needle evergreens, such as Leyland cypress, or any of the broadleaved evergreens, such as boxwoods. They should be prioritized by age. Anything planted last year should be high on the list.

A Foster holly tree that's been in the ground 10 years, for example, is probably safe without watering.

But anything that's one or two years old, you should give it a drink of water. Unfortunately, most sprinkler systems have been winterized, which puts homeowners between a rock and a hard place.

Someone is going to have to break a hose out and water these plants by hand. Hopefully, we'll soon be back to normal weather.

You should also be concerned about young deciduous trees, which are plants that lose their leaves in the fall.

Even though they have no leaves to lose water through, the ground is so dry and the temperature is so warm that the roots are active and doing something. If you planted a deciduous shrub or tree last fall, such as maple, oak, dogwood, hydrangea or spirea, you should also give them a drink of water.

However, an established tree should be okay without watering.

Some gardeners have asked about whether the drought and warm temperatures have affected spring flowering bulbs.

Normally those flowers are pretty tough. You shouldn't be too surprised if you see foliage poking up through the ground from bulbs right now because the ground is so warm. Gardeners shouldn't be worried about it. When temperatures return to normal, that'll stop the growth.

For more information about horticulture, contact the Cooperative Extension office or visit Extension's Web site at www.uaex.edu. You can also order Extension's 2006 Horticulture Highlights CD. It's packed with information from Extension experts to help you get your garden growing. It contains video clips, gardening calendars, hundreds of Q's and A's and more. Visit www.uaex.edu/hortcd to order your copy, or stop by the Extension office.

GERMINATING VEGETABLE GARDEN SEEDS FOR TRANSPLANTS

If you decide to germinate your own seeds for transplants, begin with high quality seed from an adapted superior, heirloom or hybrid variety.

Purchase seeds from a reputable seed company and save a record of your purchase in case of a complaint.

Seeds saved from a previous harvest more than a year ago should either be discarded or tested for seed germination viability. If the seed germination is less than 50 percent, discard the seeds.

To test, place 100 seeds between moist paper towels and carefully place in a small container. Keep the temperature between 70°F and 75°F and keep moist at all times. Remove and count the seeds as they germinate. Make a final count of sprouted plants at two to three weeks. Then, compute the percentage of germination.

A wide choice of containers are available including milk cartons, clay pots, compressed peat pellets and multi-plant trays with cells in which more than one plant can be grown in each cell.

The least expensive and least troublesome are larger open containers in which more than one plant can be grown. Allow 6 to 9 square inches per plant for most vegetable plants. You can use compressed peat pellets to germinate smaller plants including greens and cole crops.

Growing media for germination should be fine-textured, drain well and be free from weed seeds and diseases. Most commercial growing media may not have sufficient nutrients to sustain the transplant until it is set in the garden. You can dissolve 2 tablespoons of water soluble fertilizer (20-20-20) in a gallon of water and apply at 7 to 10 day intervals.

One way to sow most vegetable seeds, except for warm-season cucurbits, is to press them into the growing medium with a board which makes a flat bottom trench about one-half inch wide. About 8 to 10 seeds per inch of row is a good distribution rate. Most vegetable seeds will germinate if planted one-fourth inch deep. Before planting, water the medium thoroughly and allow to drain overnight.

As soon as the seeds emerge, move them to an area with more light and lower temperatures than required for germination. The optimum temperature for germinating warm season crop seeds - eggplant, peppers, okra, tomatoes and watermelon - is 80°F to 90°F. Other vegetable seeds will germinate at 60°F to 80°F. Cool season crops and tomato plants may be grown with night temperatures as low as 45°F to 50°F. Thin sprouted seedlings or place the extra ones into another container when the seedlings are about one inch tall and still in the cotyledon stage.

The final stage is the acclimation or hardening off process, which prepares the transplants for harsh outdoor weather in the garden. Begin this process about a week before planting. Move the plants outside during the day so they can acclimate to the more intense sunlight and wind. Then, gradually increase the intense exposures until plants can be left outside an entire day.

The plants may be wilted or drooping in mid-afternoon during this time as fertilizer and water are limited.

SHAGBARK HICKORY (*Carya ovata*)

Most of upland Arkansas is an oak-hickory forest mix, yet few of us give hickories a second thought. It hasn't always been like that.

During the age of wood when this country was young, hickories were one of our most important timber resources. But since the age of plastics, they have been sidelined. Nine species are described in the state, but of these the easiest to distinguish is shagbark hickory, *Carya ovata*.

Shagbark hickory is one of the largest hickories, growing to over 120 feet tall in a good site. Its main distinguishing characteristic is the smoky-gray peeling plates of bark that hang loosely to the straight, sparingly branched trunk. The plates are usually 3 to 4 inches wide and 2 feet long, giving the tree a distinctive, shaggy look. At the base of the trunk, loose bark accumulate like so much dandruff.

Shagbark leaves are compound and up to a foot long with five large leaflets. Fall color is usually a dull yellow, but in dry years hickories often go from green to brown.

Hickories are late to arrive at the party come springtime, with flowers and leaves not produced until around the first of May. Female flowers are small, insignificant looking terminal spikes while male flowers are drooping, 4-inch long slender, oak-like catkins. Flowering and fruit production usually occurs in alternate years.

The nuts produced by shagbark hickory are amongst the sweetest of the hickories, rivaling those of its cousin the pecan. The eastern Indian tribes relished them as a wintertime food. William Bartram, in his *Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia and Florida*, tells of visiting a Creek village where over 100 bushels were stored by a single family for wintertime use. The nuts were pounded, shells and all, and then boiled. The liquid was strained to produce an oily brew they called hickory milk that was used as a base for making homony and corn cakes.

Pecans didn't grow in the eastern states during Bartram's visit (the 1780s), so shagbark hickory made a good substitute. But the meat yield from pecans is higher and they are much easier to shell, so today hickories are mostly left to the squirrels, birds and deer.

Hickory wood is the strongest of our native woods. Pound for pound it is as strong as steel with good characteristics of resilience and the ability to absorb shock. It's most common use today is as handles for shovels and other hand tools. It produces more heat energy when burned than all other firewood except black locust. Green hickory wood is the most common wood for smoking in barbeque restaurants.

But as an ornamental, shagbark hickory doesn't get much respect. It's slow growing - only half as fast as a white oak which is itself too slow for most nurserymen. And, the deep taproot makes transplanting difficult. So, unless you frequent the woodlands or have a large woodlot on your property, you'll probably never get acquainted with this sturdy native tree.

PRIMOCANE FRUITING BLACKBERRIES - EXACTLY WHAT ARE THESE?? (By Dr. John R. Clark, University of Arkansas)

Many of you have heard of the new UA primocane-fruiting blackberry releases, the world's first of this type. These new developments, named Prime-Jim™ and Prime-Jan™, were released in 2004. How exactly do these plants grow?

First, these plants break buds, flower and fruit on second-year canes, known as floricanes, just as all other blackberries. These two varieties ripen quite early, late May to early June at Clarksville and near Choctaw season. Near the end of their floricanes-fruiting season, the primocanes will show flower buds at the tips of the canes, and primocane flowering will occur usually beginning in July. Here is the tricky part of the fruiting cycle in Arkansas; the high heat in July and August (and September in some years such as 2005) hinder fruit set and development, resulting in small, often poor-shaped berries. This seems to be worst when 6-10 or more consecutive days are above 85°. This of course is common in Arkansas. However, in some years very nice primocane fruit has been produced in Clarksville and even better in Fayetteville where the temperatures tend to be cooler. These varieties have performed quite poorly in south Arkansas however, in the test plots at Hope.

General recommendations for Prime-Jim™ and Prime-Jan™ are:

- These are recommended only for home garden use for late summer and fall berries.
- Fruit are not firm of the varieties, and will not handle well after harvest for commercial marketing.
- Primocanes should be tipped when they reach 3-4 ft. in height, even if flower buds are present. This will keep the canes within a reasonable height and increase lateral branching and fruiting.
- Winter pruning consists of cutting the primocanes back to where they flowered in the fall; this tissue will be dead by the winter. The remaining live buds on the lower areas of the primocanes will fruit the next year (these will be floricanes in the second year).

Of course one of the challenges in the breeding program is to select heat-tolerant primocane blackberries. I am encouraged by what I saw in 2005. Some of the new selections performed much better than Prime-Jim™ and Prime-Jan™, and I think progress can be made in improving this plant type so that we can more readily have fall fruit. Rest assured this issue is getting substantial emphasis in breeding.

I want to mention one last item on the primocane-fruiting plants. These perform much better in a moderate climate, such as the Willamette Valley of Oregon. Therefore, you may hear that these do much better in such climates and that is true. The primocane-fruiting along with floricanes-fruiting releases are becoming increasingly popular in other regions of the U.S. (and world), and our work in Arkansas is helping spread the production of blackberries to many more people.

WOOD-BURNING STOVE AND FIREPLACE SAFETY

It can be relaxing and comforting to curl up near a wood-burning stove or fireplace, but it must be properly used and maintained to operate efficiently and safely.

Some Arkansans can rely on wood as a primary heat source.

Wood can be burned efficiently in stoves, furnaces or fireplace inserts that have airtight fireboxes. The decision to heat with wood must be accompanied by a commitment to safety.

Wood must be dry before it will burn. Dried split wood burns cleaner and more evenly than wet or green wood or round sticks. It's far better, where possible, to cut wood one year for use the following year.

Without a proper flue, which discharges smoke and unburned gases outdoors, no wood fire or heating system performs safely.

A single-wall pipe is never satisfactory as a flue for wood-fired heating equipment. Single-wall pipe can be used as a connector between a stove or fireplace and a flue.

A stove or fireplace should also be properly vented because it can spill smoke or harmful fumes into a house.

To build a fire, you may want to place a small amount of crumpled paper at the bottom and cover paper with a small amount of dry kindling. A few small dry sticks should be placed on top of kindling. After a draft has been created in the stovepipe or chimney and wood coals develop, larger pieces of wood can be added to the fire.

The damper in the stovepipe must be open before a fire is started. By using the damper, the draft can be adjusted for efficient operation. Never use flammable liquids to start or to rekindle a wood fire.

Papers that contain bleaches or dyes should never be burned in the stove or fireplace because the particles produced by these can clog the air passages and produce poison and corrosive gases. It's also advised that people not use wood that has been painted, treated or made with glue, such as particle boards.

Use a professional chimney sweep to thoroughly check and clean your stovepipe or chimney each year, preferably before the heating season starts in the fall. It should also be inspected and repaired as necessary.

The smoke from a wood fire will usually contain creosote, a dark brown or black substance that is highly flammable and has an unpleasant odor.

When soot or creosote deposits become excessive, the flue, stovepipe or chimney must be cleaned.

Many house fires have been caused by improper ash disposal. Ashes need to be placed in a metal container with a tight-fitting lid. The ash container should be kept on a noncombustible floor or on the ground.

Combustible items, such as rugs, curtains, and furniture, should not be near your stove or fireplace because they can absorb radiant heat and ignite easily. Combustible floors must be protected.

A fire extinguisher should be kept in a central location known to all household members. Smoke detectors should be placed throughout the house and tested regularly.

Remember, children need to be supervised at all times when a wood-burning stove or fireplace is in use.

Heating equipment should be used and maintained as recommended by the manufacturer.

For more information on any of the above topics, please feel free to contact the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service at 425-2335.

Sincerely,

Mark D. Keaton,
County Extension Agent-
Staff Chair
MDK/sa