



NEWS RELEASE

March 25, 2021

Contact: Bill Halfman, UW Extension Agriculture Agent
Phone: 608-269-8722

EARLY SEASON GARDENING IDEAS FROM THE UW PLANT DISEASE DIAGNOSTIC CLINIC

As the temperatures begin to warm gardeners are chomping at the bit to be outdoors working away. Thoughts tend towards “What should I plant this year?” and “When should I plant and seed?” Those are great questions, but there are other aspects of gardening that I think are important to consider. This month, I’d like to share what I think about at this time of year as I try to prepare for a successful growing season.

Garden clean-up. I often talk about the importance of fall clean-up for plant disease management. Plant pathogens often overwinter in debris from infected plants left over from the previous growing season. Removing this material from a garden helps eliminate a source of pathogens that can reinfect plants during the current growing season. While fall is a great time to do this removal, there are a variety of reasons why gardeners might choose not to do clean-up in the fall. Some people just don’t have the time. Some like to use leaf litter to insulate flower beds. Others like to maintain plants that have died back for winter visual interest in their gardens or as overwintering sites for beneficial insects. If you’re one of the people who likes to keep plant debris around for the winter, spring is the time to take care of this material. Try to remove the debris before plants begin to produce new growth, and burn (where allowed), bury or hot compost it.

Watering concerns. This can be a tough time of year for many evergreens (particularly yews and boxwoods), as they tend to be prone to winter burn. Sometimes winter burn develops during the winter months, but spring is a prime time for symptoms to develop as plants start to photosynthesize and thus lose more water through stomates on needles and leaves. So, as the ground begins to thaw and new needles and leaves begin to emerge, make sure evergreens are receiving sufficient water. Established plants (those planted three years or more) require approximately one inch of water per week from rain or from supplemental watering with a drip or soaker hose placed at their driplines (i.e., the edges of where the branches extend). Newly transplanted plants (those planted within the past three years) require roughly two inches of water per week.

Decontaminating pots. If you grow plants in pots or other containers, and particularly if you have issues with root rots or other diseases caused by soil-borne pathogens, you should seriously consider decontaminating your containers before reusing them this year. Empty any soil from the containers and discard the soil (especially if the plants previously grown in the containers have had disease issues), wash the containers thoroughly to remove any remaining soil, then soak the containers for 30 minutes in a 10% bleach solution (one part of a disinfecting

bleach and nine parts water). Rinse the containers thoroughly to remove any bleach residues and you're ready to plant. Note that this technique works best for clay or ceramic pots, but may not be reliable for plastic pots. Sometimes the best way to decontaminate plastic pots is to not use them again and recycle when possible or throw them away.

Mapping vegetable gardens. For long-term success with vegetable gardening, crop rotation is a must. Growing the same (or related) vegetables in the same spot in your vegetable garden year after year is a great way to build up disease-causing organisms in the soil. These pathogens can cause problems for years, if not decades, to come. So, if you haven't been mapping out where you plant your vegetables each year, make this the year when you start doing that. Buy some graph paper, draw your vegetable garden space to scale and preplan where you will plant your various vegetables this year. Keep this plan as a reference so that next year when you create your 2022 map, you can properly rotate your vegetables to new areas in your garden. If possible, don't grow the same (or related) vegetables in the same area for a period of at least three to four years.

Keeping a garden journal. Also, make this the year that you start documenting what goes on in your garden. Record information on when plants emerge or begin to leaf out, and when they flower. Keep track of the weather including temperatures, rain (and snow), significant storm events (hail, high winds, driving rains) and note when you see particular insects and diseases in your garden. This sort of information can be very useful (particularly after you have several years' data) in predicting insect pest and disease activity and thinking ahead about how to fend off these sorts of problems.

I hope these pointers help you have a successful 2021 gardening season. For additional information on the PDDC and its activities, check out the PDDC website <https://pddc.wisc.edu/>. To learn about new PDDC education materials and programs, follow the clinic on Twitter or Facebook (@UWPDDC) or contact the clinic at pddc@wisc.edu and ask to be added to the PDDC's listserv (UWPDDCLearn).

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