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Research and Extension

Butler County

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The Grapevine

Benefits of Rainwater for Houseplants by Chris Stuhlsatz

Using rainwater for your houseplants is a simple yet highly effective way to enhance their growth and vitality. Unlike tap water, which often contains chemicals like chlorine and fluoride, rainwater is naturally soft and free from these additives. This means your plants can absorb nutrients more efficiently, leading to healthier foliage and more vibrant blooms.

Rainwater is also slightly acidic, which mimics the natural environment that many houseplants thrive in. This acidity can help in maintaining an optimal pH level in the soil, promoting better nutrient uptake. Additionally, rainwater contains essential minerals like nitrogen, which is a key nutrient for plant growth.

Collecting and using rainwater is not only beneficial for your plants but also environmentally friendly. It reduces your dependence on treated water, conserving this precious resource. Plus, it's free! All you need is a simple rain barrel or container to collect it.

In summary, watering your houseplants with rainwater can lead to stronger, healthier plants, while also contributing to a more sustainable lifestyle. Your plants will thank you with lush leaves and abundant blooms!



Fall Lawn Care



Fall is one of the most important times of the year for your cool-season lawn. With the cooler daytime and nighttime temperatures, the grass has started to grow after a period of semi-dormancy through the heat of the summer. For a cool-season lawn, September is the most important month when it comes to fertilizer. Nitrogen applied during September helps thicken the stand and encourages the development of a healthy root system. A November application (at about the time of the final mowing of the season) helps the turf build food reserves. This enables the lawn to green up earlier in the spring, without the excessive shoot growth that often accompanies early spring N

applications. Most tall fescue lawns need approximately one pound of nitrogen in the September or November applications. The best type of fertilizer for the September application is a mix of quick and slow-release nitrogen sources. Mulching grass clippings is also a wonderful way to add nitrogen to the soil and can reduce your need for nitrogen by up to 25%.

Fall is an excellent time of the year to control weeds in your lawn. Next year's dandelions have germinated and right now, all weeds are moving nutrients into their roots to help them make it through the long winter which means broadleaf herbicides will also be taken to the roots. These young plants are small and easily controlled with herbicides such as 2,4-D or combination products (Trimec, Weed-B-Gon, Weed-Out) that contain 2,4-D, MCP, and Dicamba. The best way to prevent weeds in your lawn is to have a thick healthy stand of grass, but that is a conversation for a different time. It is impossible to control 100% of weeds in the lawn and that is OK!

As we prepare to mow the yard for what is hopefully one of the last times of the year it's time to think about preparing your lawn mower ready for its long winter's break. Be sure to drain the gasoline from gas-powered engines or use a gasoline stabilizer to prevent the gas from becoming thick and gummy. Check your spark plug or replace it so you are ready to mow in the spring. If you have a riding lawn mower or one with a battery be sure to remove the battery and clean the terminals to prevent corrosion.

Once you have serviced the engine, be sure to check the blades. Dull blades can damage the grass when you cut it and leave a "feathered" look on the ends of the grass blades. As you sharpen the blades check for damage, if you can't smooth it out the blades need to be replaced. Grind or file the edge of the blade till it is about 1/32 inch as a razor-sharp edge can actually lead to a poor cut. Clean the blades and the underside of the mower to remove any matted grass.

If you seeded your yard this fall continue to water it to keep the seedlings growing and ensure they are more likely to survive the winter. With our current dry conditions and the expectation that those dry conditions will continue I recommend watering your lawn every couple of weeks.

Take Away:

- Apply lawn herbicides as little as possible each year.
- A one-time, fall application will be most effective at controlling perennial weeds.
- Spraying: Wear Boots! Wear Long Sleeves! Wear Gloves! Back AWAY from the application area – DON'T walk INTO it! READ THE LABEL! UNDERSTAND THE LABEL.
- Be sure to service your lawn mower so it's ready to go in the spring.
- Water your lawn as needed so the soil is moist going into winter.

Plant of the Week- Purple False Thistle

As I was driving down the road I saw these beautiful purple blooms that I originally thought were *Liatris* but a closer inspection showed them to be False Purple Thistle (Leavenworth's *Eryngo*) or *Eryngium leavenworthii* a native plant to Kansas. While its common name calls it a thistle this plant is not a true thistle but is often confused with one based on its flowers and appearance. It is actually in the Sea Holly family of striking ornamental plants grown for their flowers.

False purple thistle is an annual plant with a leafy stem that is broadly branched at the top. Almost the entire plant has some shade of purple to it with the leaves emerging as gray/green then turning purple as they mature and the royal purple thistle-like flowers that bloom from mid-summer through early fall. This plant grows from 24 to 42" tall and does best in poor soil in full sun to light shade so this plant is excellent for a shallow soil site, a rock garden, or in a sunny gravel garden.

This plant is deer resistant, requires low care, and tolerates heat and drought conditions. The blooms make excellent fresh-cut or dried flowers in a flower arrangement just wear gloves when handling them because of the prickles. I know, I'm recommending you plant a "thistle" in your flowerbeds but unlike the musk thistle I grew up with this one is a native and far better behaved than musk thistles. While it is an annual, this plant will self-sow in the flowerbed so it would not need replanting.



Insect of the Week- Whitefly



Whiteflies feed on a variety of vegetable and floral crops including poinsettias, geraniums, salvia, hibiscus, coleus, tomatoes, lettuce, and others. Adult whiteflies are about 1/16" long with snow-white wings and a yellow body. Whiteflies can complete their life cycle in 21-36 days depending on the temperatures. Damage from whiteflies is two-fold, they suck the juices out of the host leaves causing wilting and lack of vigor and they also excrete honeydew on which a fungus called sooty mold develops. This sooty mold covers the surface of the leaves and interferes with the plant's photosynthetic processes. The easiest way to

spot whiteflies is to brush up against plants and see the adults fly. Control can be difficult with the species in some areas becoming resistant to chemicals. There are several control measures that can be used including sticky traps, using a small handheld vacuum to suck up the adults and reduce the population (This is best done in the morning when they are cool and slow moving. You should freeze the vacuum bag for approximately 24 hours to kill the insects vacuumed up.) and chemical controls. If chemical control is warranted alternate the chemicals used as some adults may be resistant to one chemical but not others. Options for control include neem oil, insecticidal soap, horticultural oil, pyrethrin products, imidacloprid, malathion, or permethrin. Be sure to read the labels and make sure the products are listed for house plants and to control whiteflies. The best control will be achieved with four or five applications at five to seven-day intervals. Be sure to spray the lower leaf surface and apply as soon as whiteflies are detected rather than waiting till populations become severe. If plants are heavily infested it's probably best to discard the plants and start over.

Upcoming Events

Garden Hour Webinars:

October 2nd- Evergreens
in Kansas

November 6th- Rabbit,
Mole, and Deer
Mitigation

December 4th- Home
Hydroponics

Upcoming Events:

September 29th 12 to 5
pm
Greater Andover Days
Master Gardener Booth

October 9th at 6 pm
Houseplant Care at
Bradford Memorial
Library

Myth of the Month- Adding Gravel to the Bottom of a Pot

A common practice when I was growing up was to add gravel or pot shards to the bottom of a pot to add additional weight and reduce the amount of potting soil needed for that pot. This has also been a common practice in pots that lack drainage holes with the thought being that the excess water will sit in the gravel and not be held by the potting soil. Does this practice actually work or is it detrimental to the plant? Let's find out.

Ideally, when a plant in a container is watered the water percolates through the soil and out the drainage hole below. All the roots get water and the excess drains away. It was believed that the water would continue through the layer of gravel the same way it moves through the potting soil. What actually happens is the gravel forms what is called a "perched water table". The water will hit the gravel, pot shards, milk jugs, different potting soil, etc.; instead of going straight down and out the drain hole, the water moves sideways. This creates a "saturated zone" where the water sits. When the roots hit this layer they tend to rot because there is too much moisture in the soil. The other issue with gravel or any other additive is that they can block the drainage hole completely. This issue will also happen with pots that don't have drainage holes. The key to those types of pots is to watch how you water and use some method to keep from overwatering (checking the soil moisture with a wooden skewer, picking the pot up and checking the weight, using your finger to check the soil moisture, etc) for the best health of your plants.

While this was a common practice with pots and many people still use gravel in the bottom of a pot it's best to discontinue this practice for the health of your plant. The exception to this is using sticks, logs, or other organic material in the bottom of raised beds to reduce the amount of soil needed to fill them up. You can still do this due to the size of the raised beds and the wood will break down over time to add organic material to your soil.



