

Gardening Tips for November 30 - December 6, 2015

Ashes and other soil amendments

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. Many gardeners and homeowners throw a lot of things on their garden, especially in the non-gardening season, thinking that it will be a good way to get rid of it and it will benefit the soil. One thing that is often tossed out on the garden is ashes from a fireplace or wood stove. I'm not sure exactly WHY ashes are added but I'm thinking that the belief is that the ashes came from wood, wood comes from trees, trees are a plant and so adding ashes to the garden soil is a good thing. Unfortunately, adding ashes to most garden soils is not a good thing. From a nutrient point of view, ashes have no nitrogen, very little phosphorus but they do have significant amounts of potassium. Most of our soils around here are very high in potassium already, they don't need more. But here's the real reason you don't want to add wood ashes to your garden. Ashes are quite alkaline. They raise the pH of soil. Most of our soils already have a pH higher than what we would really like. IF you had tested your soil and found that it was acidic, and we do have acid soils in parts of the area, then adding ashes would be okay. But since we have a far greater number of soils that are already alkaline, we're better off just not doing it. In many parts of the country, especially east of the Mississippi River, the soils are much more acid and commonly have low potassium levels. For those parts of the country ashes could be added and be beneficial. But for around our part of the country, you're better off just sprinkling them lightly over the lawn, the ditch or anywhere other than your garden. This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte.

Is it too late to work garden soil?

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. I have a flower bed in front of my house that I wanted to spade up this fall and incorporate a bunch of leaves into. Unfortunately, I may have missed my window of opportunity. You never want to work soil when it is wet as you will compact it and invariably make a lot of clods. It then takes a long time to get those clods and compaction fixed, so you're better off just not making a problem to begin with. Back in late October, the ground was fairly dry. The flowers had quit blooming and I had enough leaves to dig in to improve soil tilth, but I thought I'd wait just a little longer. Then it rained on Halloween. And then it rained again, even more. More leaves came down but the soil is now way too wet. If we get into a dry spell, and assuming that the ground isn't frozen, you can still work soil in the winter. But make sure it isn't too wet. Working soil in the fall has some great advantages. If you are working organic matter into the soil, like I wanted to do, it will start breaking down before spring. Adding a little fertilizer before you till it up will help as the nitrogen serves as a food source for many of the microorganisms that break down the leaves. Or, if you know that you need to lower soil pH with sulfur, or raise it with lime, applying those compounds and tilling in the fall or winter just gives that much more time to start to change the soil pH. These products work by slowly interacting with the soil particles. It takes finely ground material, moisture and time. But all of this depends on drying weather, which we aren't having right now, so just be patient. This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420

KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte.

Dormant seeding of turfgrass

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. Now that the soil is really starting to cool down you can consider a dormant seeding of fescue or bluegrass. Dormant seeding works because we sow the grass seed when it is too cool to germinate. In theory it lays in the soil until the soil warms up in late February or early March and then it starts to grow. As I've said many times before, success with any grass seeding method requires good seed to soil contact. Normally we depend on some form of seeding that places the seed into the soil or we rake or mechanically cover the seed with soil. We will do that with dormant seeding using raking, core aeration or verticutting and immediately sowing the seed behind. The soil surface has to be dry for this to work however. But two other tricks we can use, especially if we have small patches we want to dormant seed become very weather dependent. The first method is to wait until we have a light snowfall, usually an inch or less. You go out and immediately sow the seed on top of the snow. In fact you can sometimes do this while it is still snowing. As the snow melts, it carries the seed right down to the soil surface and into good contact with the soil. The second method requires a moist soil surface. You sow the seed on top of the moist soil. As moist soil freezes and thaws, small pockets form on the wet bare soil that tends to catch and hold the seed. As the soil then dries, the pockets collapse and essentially covers the seed with a shallow layer of soil. So if you have small areas that need some seeding, you have options as we move through the winter months! This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte.