

Are heirloom varieties the answer?

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. I read a lot about heirloom varieties of garden seeds and even fruit trees and a lot of people ask me about them. I'll be honest - I've grown my fair share of heirloom varieties - some recently and some when they weren't even heirlooms yet but the standard varieties that everyone was growing. I probably get most of my heirloom variety questions about tomatoes. The first question I like to ask is why are you interested in heirloom varieties? Is it for flavor, which is the number one reason I get from folks. If so, then often heirloom varieties may be the answer because many people want a tomato that tastes like the tomato that mom or grandma always served them. But if you are going to grow heirloom varieties, also be aware of what you may be giving up. Many heirloom varieties were replaced because of disease issues. You may need to spray more regularly with fungicides and definitely put these tomatoes where you haven't had tomatoes for a few years. Oft times older varieties were left behind because of low production or other undesirable qualities. Yes, many of the newer varieties, especially tomatoes, are designed to produce high yields and in a tighter production window. Which if you want to put up salsa or canned tomatoes, may be the way to go. I don't have a problem with heirloom varieties, but they aren't a panacea for all your problems and they may not even taste like you remember them when it's all said and done. Know what you want and then research what you're getting with each cultivar so you end up with the desired result! This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte.

Impact of Cold Weather on Insects

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. One question that I am asked, a lot, is whether really cold winter weather reduces insect populations. Actually it is more commonly spoken as a statement and the individual is looking for confirmation. The short answer is yes and no but mostly no. Insects have incredible mechanisms to help them survive cold weather. If it never got down below freezing or very far below freezing we would have a lot of issues. Once it gets down below about 25 though, non winter hardy insects are pretty well done in. But for those with winter hardiness, it only takes a few cool days and they pretty well settle into winter dormancy and are going to be pretty immune to even sub zero temperatures. So if it gets down to 10 or 0 or 10 below or even colder, it really doesn't matter, they will survive it. However, every time it gets cold and then we have a warm up, compare last week to this week, these over wintering insects will often wake up and become active for short periods of time. This uses up food reserves that they can't replace. Then it gets cold again and they go back into dormancy. The more of these cycles we have, the more body reserves they use up and the better the likelihood that they will not survive the winter. Whereas when it gets cold and stays cold, they use up far fewer food reserves and they can actually survive winter in better shape. So contrary to the old theory that a good hard cold winter gets rid of more insects, we actually need a winter mixed up with cold spells and warm spells followed by more cold spells and warm spell. Oh how I love being a myth buster! This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte.

How Do Plants Survive Cold Weather?

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. I recently received a photo from a friend in south Kansas of plants on her mother's farm that were bright green following that bitter cold weather we had in mid December. Her question was very simple - how on earth, after a weekend of temperatures well below zero was there still green plant material? Why hadn't it all frozen into some glob of brownish dead vegetation? I'm sure we've all been out after a very cold period and are somewhat amazed that there is any green vegetation left anywhere. Well, some plants are not winter hardy. They simply are going to grow until it gets so cold that they die. Plant death occurs because the water in the plant cells freeze, the freezing water causes ice crystals and the ice crystals rupture the cell membranes, the water all leaks out when it warms and the plant dies. We've seen this waterlogged look the day after a hard freeze hits the garden. The tomato leaves are a funny deep green, then they wilt and in a week they are brown and dried out. Plants that have winter hardiness often have the ability to reduce the free liquid in their cells. They increase the amount of sugars, they create compounds that act as antifreeze in the cells, some plants can adjust the lipid composition of cell membranes. Some plants, through some complex mechanisms can even generate small amounts of heat to keep ice crystals from forming. It all comes down to acclimation. Some plants, like tomatoes, will not survive subfreezing weather. But other plants, like chickweed and dandelions, have many methods to get them through winter! This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte.

Ginko Trees

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. I am often asked what kind of tree someone should plant in their yard. Often before I can even answer I get the qualifiers of it has to grow fast, be strong and have no problems. The answer to that one is there is no tree. I also often fall back to what I know a homeowner can find in the trade. But I often think of so many other trees that have so many neat characteristics that I wish people would consider, although it may take a trip to Wichita, Topeka or Kansas City to find one in a nursery. So over the coming weeks I'll try to introduce you to one tree species per week, or so that homeowners should consider. The first is the Ginkgo tree. The Ginkgo biloba is one of the oldest cultivated species of trees originating in China. Ginkgos have separate male and female trees. Virtually all of the trees found in the trade are males which is a good thing because the female tree bears a curious soft shelled seed that has a very foul smell! They have a very unique leaf shape, the leaves through the season are sort of a light green and it has delicate golden yellow fall color. Ginkgos are hardy as far north as Zone 3, we're a Zone 5 or 6. They need full sun to part shade. They have a medium growth rate, up to two feet a year and has a mature height of 40 to 50 feet and a spread of 25 to 35 feet. Like all young trees it needs regular watering the first few years but after that it is generally fairly drought tolerant. It is adaptable to many soil types and is tolerant of urban conditions including heat and compacted soils. I can not recall seeing a ginkgo around Junction City, but they are really neat trees! This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte.

The problem with catalogs and web pages

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. I love gardening catalogs as well as the myriad of websites that are now out there for gardening seed and supply firms. But I have a real issue with them and quite honestly with many of the nationwide stores that sell plants and seeds. They sell what they can sell, but many of the things they sell you shouldn't be buying and planting. Plant species and plant cultivars and named varieties are like people. No two are identical and they all have certain preferences. Most gardeners, in all honesty, make their buying decisions based on attractive photos in the pages of a garden catalog. They don't read the details, they don't talk with other gardeners, they don't talk to their local county extension agent. They buy it because they like the way it looks and because some company will sell it to them. Stores keep selling blue spruces because you all keep buying them. Never mind the fact that well over half of them will die because they aren't well adapted. As you move north and south through a plant's native range, the genetics change and often drastically. A bur oak cultivar that grows well in central Arkansas may die in northern Minnesota. They are all bur oaks, but the native genetics are different. When you buy from a local nursery you are buying from people that understand plants and they are selling what has worked well for them. They know which vegetable varieties have done well for them and will do well for you. They have the experience that they know. So next time, before you plop down good money for a pretty picture, do some research and give me a call first! This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte.