

Gardening with Chuck for February 27 - March 5, 2017

The myth of Epsom Salts

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 old gardeners tales and recommendations. I love them because most of the time they are basically bogus nonsense that has been handed down for generations. Nobody knows why, nobody knows what they are supposed to do, but people just keep doing it. So how many of you have heard that you should apply Epsom salts for good tomato production or in fact do it? Why do you do it, or do you know? Epsom salts is hydrated magnesium sulfate. From a chemical point of view it is 10% magnesium and 13% sulfur. If you need magnesium or sulfur this would be one product to use to meet those needs. So here's the kicker, Kansas soils rarely, if ever, are deficient in magnesium. In 35 years I've never seen a soil test with a magnesium deficiency. Sulfur we do occasionally see becoming deficient, but not once has it been in a home vegetable garden. The two nutrients that I most commonly see being deficient in gardens in our area are nitrogen and phosphorus, not magnesium or sulfur. I've also seen people promoting mixing up Epsom salts in water and spraying on the leaves. I am not a fan of foliar feeding of plants. Nutrients should be taken up through the roots of the plant, not through the foliage. I'm also opposed to doing anything that makes tomato leaves wet because wet tomato leaves soon become diseased tomato leaves. Let's take a soil test of your garden. We can have it analyzed for magnesium and sulfur. If your garden soil is short of either of these, then you can use Epsom salts. But if, as I suspect will be the case, they aren't deficient, save your money! This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte.

Weather Impacts

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. So we had 6 days during February with temperatures of 70 or above. Another five days with temperatures in the 60s. All of this occurring during a month when average daily highs should only be in the 30s. We also had overnight lows in the 40s when they should have been in the 20s. We've all seen the impact. Some flowers and early season shrubs were starting to bloom. Buds were swelling everywhere, grass was starting to green up, oh and henbit and dandelions were starting to bloom. Then winter woke up and roared back in dropping temperatures back down to where they should be in late February or early March. So what will that do to our landscape plants, ornamentals and fruit trees? One thing to keep in mind is that any damage we see will be superficial impacting the blooming and or fruit setting of plants. Leaf buds are more cold resistant and plants can generate new leaf buds. Blossoms are a once a year shot sort of thing! Spring flowering bulbs are tough. Many hadn't even moved flower buds above ground yet and even if they did, they can take temperatures into the low 20s with no damage. Some maples were blooming but I doubt that anyone will be disappointed if there are fewer little helicopter seeds. Fruit trees are a big question mark at this time and much of it comes down to what the weather is like in March. I'm afraid that apricots and peaches have simply gotten advanced too far and will probably bloom too early to have much hope of a fruit crop. Apples, pears and tart cherries are holding tighter and I think still have a chance! This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte.

Soil Temperatures and vegetables

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. One of the most important tools for a home gardener is a soil thermometer. These come in many forms but my preferred soil thermometer is actually a digital cooking thermometer. The digital readout is easy to view and the 4 inch long pointed metal probe makes it easy to stick into the ground. You will hear me regularly refer to soil temperatures - in fact more so than air temperatures. When we were having all that warm weather over the past few weeks, I think most of us knew that we weren't out of winter yet and then reality came blasting back in the form of that cold front last Friday. Gardening in the spring is a delicate balance of air temperature, soil temperature and calendar. The calendar comes in to remind us of the odds of having certain types of weather. Soil temperature though is as equally important as air temperature. We can plant tomatoes in mid April and by utilizing items like walls of water we can keep the plant itself from freezing. But the tomato plants will not thrive because the soil is too cold. Tomatoes need soil temperatures of at least 55 degrees and in all honesty 60 or 65 is better. 40 degrees is my minimum starting point on soil temperature for peas. Lettuce, parsnips, spinach, radishes and probably potatoes need 45 degree soil. Sweet corn and beans need 55 degrees and peppers, vine crops and sweet potatoes need 60 degrees or warmer. Those temperatures need to be morning minimum temperature at about 10 a.m. and every day for 5 to 7 days to avoid short period ups and downs, keeping an eye, of course, on that weather forecast! This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte.

Understand the needs of the plant

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. You don't know how many times I'm called out to look at a plant that a homeowner has planted in their yard that is not doing well. Occasionally there is a problem, such as insect or disease, that we can address but all too often the problem is an environmental issue which usually boils down to the wrong plant in the wrong place. Plants are like people. They have likes and dislikes. All too often their dislikes can be fatal because of the requirements that they have for growth. The first thing you need to do is to understand all the little microclimates in your yard. Full sun vs part sun, southwest windy exposure vs northeast shady sheltered exposure. We may only be talking 100 feet apart in your yard, but to plants it can be a continent apart. Once you've determined what the microclimates are where you want a plant, next make a list of plants that are matched to that location. If you want to plant some holly bushes, which need partial shade and protection from hot southwest summer winds, but all you have is a full sun hot southwest exposure location, don't plant a holly bush there. You need to move on to something else. The most common problems I run in to are that hot southwest exposure, full shade or heavy soils that don't drain well. Most shrubs and trees need partial to full sun. Plants need photosynthesis to live and photosynthesis needs sunlight. It's that simple. Learn your yard, determine where you need new or replacement landscape plants, then stop by the office and pick up some of our bulletins or visit with me about what plants might work for you! This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte.

Deal with the itch by planting peas

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. Last week was cruel because it was so nice. Then the weather change rolled in and this week has been slightly closer to what we should see in early March. But it doesn't matter because too many people have now been infected with spring fever. One of the early antidotes for spring fever is to plant peas. Peas are a cold hardy crop and are probably one of the earliest vegetables that we can get in the ground, often even before potatoes. If the ground has dried out and warmed up to 40 degrees, you can plant peas. Because peas thrive in cool weather, but wilt in hot weather, you need to plant early maturing types that can be harvested before the weather turns off hot. Little Marvel is the variety that has been the long running standard, but others that can be considered include Green Arrow, Knight, Maestro, Burpeeana and Mr. Big. These are all what we call shelling peas. We can also consider planting snow peas which are the ones commonly used in stir fry cooking that have a crisp edible pod. Varieties to look for include Dwarf Grey Sugar and Mammoth Melting Sugar. Sugar snap peas are sort of a cross between the two and consider Sugar Bon, Sugar Ann, Super Sugar Snap and Sugar Sprint. All of these should be planted about ½ inch deep for quick germination. Place the seeds 2 inches apart in the row and it often works best to plant dual rows 6 to 8 inches apart so that the floppy plants can support each other. You can also run a trellis line down between the two rows to provide support for taller varieties. You may also need fencing to keep the rabbits out! This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte.