

## Christmas Tree Care

This is Gardening with Chuck. I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent. If your Christmas tree comes out of a box that was stored in the attic the past 11 months you can tune out now. But if you are one of the lucky ones with a real photosynthesizing tree, keep listening. First thing is to get a tree that's as fresh as possible. If you get a fresh cut tree, awesome. If you buy yours at a lot or a store, bend a couple of needles in your fingers. If they break rather than bend OR if half the needles fall off the tree when you give it a good thump on the ground, keep looking. The sap contains a resin that seals over the end of the trunk within a few hours of it being cut. This needs to be removed just before putting it in the stand. Cut off  $\frac{3}{8}$  to  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch. By removing this sealed off portion the tree can take up water in the stand. It's important to keep the tree well watered and as moist as possible as that resinous compound in the sap is also highly flammable. Keeping water in the stand and the tree helps dilute these flammable compounds that are in the sap. The first week you need to be checking the water in the stand 3 or 4 times a day. Once the tree has gotten well rehydrated it's water use should stabilize and twice a day is likely often enough. A fresh cut tree may only need to be watered once or twice a day as it will not have had as long to dry out! While a lot of additives have been sold and used over the years, none of them have really been shown to keep the tree any fresher than just plenty of regular water. As soon as Christmas is over, remove the tree and other decorative greenery from the house to reduce the fire risk. I'm Chuck Otte and this has been Gardening with Chuck.

## Don't Add Wood Ashes to Your Garden

This is Gardening with Chuck. I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent. I was reading a gardening article in the newspaper recently and it was talking about adding wood ashes to your garden. I'm sure my wife thought something was wrong because I screamed, NOOO! You will routinely see articles that talk about adding wood ashes from a fireplace or wood stove to the garden to improve the soil. While this may work well for gardens east of the Mississippi River, it can be a big mistake around here. Adding wood ashes to your garden will do two things. First of all they will raise the potassium or potash levels in your garden. That's about the only nutrient that they will add as nitrogen, phosphorus and many of the micronutrients are pretty well burned out in the fire. Most Kansas soils have an abundance of potassium and do not need more. The second thing ashes will do is to raise the soil pH. Many of our Kansas soils have a neutral to alkaline pH level already. Adding ashes will simply make a problem worse. IF you need potassium in your garden soil OR you have an acid soil then ashes might be a good way to help deal with this. The problem is that you can't tell what your garden soil needs just by looking at it. Acid soils pretty much look just like alkaline soils in our area. Levels of nutrients like potassium are going to give you no clue by visual inspection of the soil if they are high or low. The only way to know for sure what your soil needs is by doing a soil test that can tell you exactly the soil pH and levels of nutrients. Fortunately all you have to do is bring a composite soil sample to the office and we'll take it from there! I'm Chuck Otte and this has been Gardening with Chuck.

## Deer Scrapes

This is Gardening with Chuck. I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent. A homeowner sent me a photo of a pine tree that had been scraped up pretty good by a deer recently asking for ways to fix the damage. Unfortunately, once bark has been removed from a section of a tree there is no way to really fix it. Bark on a tree isn't like skin on you and me. A tree can't grow new bark over the injured area. It will slowly develop what's called callous tissue that will grow in around the edges of the injured area. But this can take years. If the bark is removed all the way around a tree, the portion of the tree above the injured area will die because the area just under the surface of the bark is where the water and nutrients that keep that tree alive are. By taking off that bark you have essentially severed all the little tubes that have kept that tree alive. The area below that will still live and new shoots will develop except on pines or cedars. So once that bark is scraped off the tree by a testosterone crazed deer, there's not much you can do. Small gashes and narrow areas of scraped bark will callous over fairly quickly and the tree will be none the worse for wear. Large areas of bark completely scraped off the tree is another story and there will be long term damage. Which then brings the question of how to stop deer from doing this. Other than 24 hour armed guards standing by the tree there's not much you can do. The recommendation that seems to have the best success is to get bars of Irish Spring soap, cut them in half, drill a hole through the bar section and hang in the tree. If there is a lot of precipitation you may have to repeat this but I've seen it help, not stop, but help! I'm Chuck Otte and this has been Gardening with Chuck.

## Wrapping Trees

This is Gardening with Chuck. I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent. Yesterday I was talking about deer scrape injuries. While tree wrap won't help FIX a tree that's been deer scraped, it may help protect a tree and it will definitely protect younger thin barked trees from winter sunscald. Tree wrap is a heavy brown paper that is sold in rolls. It is usually 2 to 4 inches wide. You start at the bottom of the tree and you wrap it around the tree in a spiral wrap fashion. You want to go up 4 to 5 feet on the tree or up to the first branches. Some tree wraps have a sticky edge to help keep it in place. Others you may just have to use a staple or small tack to keep it in place. Don't use twine or string as it can damage the tree. There are also hard plastic spiral coils that may help to give a little more protection against deer scrapes but they won't really help protect against sun scald. Sun scald is most likely to happen in the first two winters after planting of thin barked trees like honeylocust and especially maples like sugar and red maples. In young trees the bark on the sunny side of the tree can warm well above freezing on sunny winter days. This causes the sap to start flowing. Then cold overnight temperatures set in and the water freezes bursting the cells which causes them to dry out and die. You end up with a large dead area on the trunk that you probably won't notice for several years. Once it's damaged there's not much you can do. Get out now and wrap those young maples and even ash or fruit trees. But remember to take the wrap off by late March to prevent damage to the tree. If wrap is left on it can create insect damage. I'm Chuck Otte and this has been Gardening with Chuck.

## Winterizing Strawberries

This is Gardening with Chuck. I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent. Strawberries are pretty winter hardy IF they've had the chance to become acclimated to the cold weather. While we had some fairly sudden temperature drops during the month I think they are probably doing okay because the ground has been warm enough to provide some protection. Regardless of how the autumn has progressed, we know that strawberries will survive better and be more productive next year if they are properly mulched down in November or at least by early December.

Another advantage that mulching gives your strawberry bed is protection of the plants against frost heaving. Heaving, as it sounds, is when periodic freezing and thawing of the soil causes the strawberry plants to be forced up out of the ground. The crowns and roots are exposed to drying cold weather and the plant dies. Good quality wheat straw makes the best mulch. If you are looking at bales avoid those that appear to have a lot of weeds, especially grassy weeds baled up with the straw. When you start to take the bales apart they will come apart as slabs. Shake these slabs of straw so that they break up and try to get 3 inches of straw uniformly applied over the bed. Sometimes, if your bed is exposed to the wide open winds it can help to pound stakes in the ground and then run twine back and forth over the bed in a criss cross pattern with the twine tied off on the stakes. Then pound the stakes down to firm the twine against the straw and the ground. Come spring time mulch should be removed gradually so the plants aren't shocked. Some mulch can be left to keep fruit off the ground. I'm Chuck Otte and this has been Gardening with Chuck.