

# The Green Thumb

Lawn and Garden News You Can Use

April 2008

## Crabapple Trees Offer Gorgeous Spring Bloom

David Robson, horticulture educator

Crabapples can be relied upon each year for spectacular blooms. Few ornamental trees are so hardy or offer such a wide range of shapes, sizes, flower colors, and interesting fruits.

To some homeowners, crabapples are the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde of the plant world. They are beautiful in the spring when in bloom, but then become a messy nightmare by mid-summer.



Diseases such as apple scab, cedar rust and mildew can severely blemish foliage and cause early leaf drop. Fruit also becomes a nuisance as it ripens, drops to the ground, and rots.

But not all crabapples display these undesirable traits. There are more than 700 cultivars available, and newer introductions have been selected for desirable landscape characteristics such as disease resistance and small fruit.

Before purchasing a crabapple, spend some time researching varieties. Avoid older cultivars such as "Hopa," "Almey" and "Eleyi" because of their susceptibility to disease. Don't even accept them as a freebie. Avoid any newer cultivar that doesn't specify that it is resistant to apple scab. When choosing a crabapple, make sure the plant tag specifically states the tree is resistant to apple scab. The U of I Extension website has more information on disease-resistant crabapples.

Along with selecting crabapple varieties resistant to disease, look for varieties with persistent fruit. Some trees hold their fruit through the winter holiday season or beyond, until the frozen apples finally shrivel or are eaten by wintering birds.

If you are the owner of a crabapple that annually creates a mess with dropping rotting fruit, you can reduce fruit set. There are several products on the market, including an insecticide, which can cause fruit to abort before they are fully formed. However, timing is crucial, and application should occur during or immediately after flowering.

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# Tips for Harvesting Asparagus

Tony Bratsch, horticulture educator



If you have planted asparagus in recent years, there are a few guidelines for harvesting which can help ensure the future success and health of the planting.

Over-harvesting can weaken plants and reduce next season's crop. New plantings need several years to develop mature, underground crowns that can support sustained harvests.

Asparagus spears start to emerge when soil temperatures reach about 50 degrees. After emergence, growth is dependent on air tempera-

tures. Thus, as temperatures warm, picking frequency increases. In the early season, you may pick once every three to five days, and at peak season, you may be picking once, possibly twice, a day.

In a new bed, avoid harvesting the year of planting. This allows time for proper early grow and development. Recent research has shown that removing a few of the earliest large spears in the second year after planting may promote growth. This should only be done when first year growth was vigorous. By the third season, a limited harvest period of two to three weeks is possible. Choose only those spears which are larger than a pencil, and wait until they are 7 to 10 inches long. Spears should be snapped at ground level or cut just below the surface. In the fourth growing season, harvest for about four weeks, and in successive years six to eight weeks or until emerging spears start reducing in size (pencil diameter).

For all plantings, a key goal is to encourage good foliage or "fern" growth that builds the crown buds for next year's crop. So, it is important not to neglect asparagus foliage during the summer after harvest, and to keep it healthy over the growing season. Do not mow or cut it back until after first fall frost. Rarely will asparagus need extra water because of its deep roots; however, it will respond to fertilizer.

Fertilize plantings before first spears emerge. Use 1 to 2 pounds of 10-10-10 or equivalent fertilizer per 100 square feet. Some plantings, depending on soil type, may respond to dividing this amount between before and just after the harvest period.

Also, control weeds that compete with asparagus. This can be done using garden mulch or with Preen™, a pre-emergence garden herbicide registered for asparagus. Do not salt asparagus beds to control weeds. Although salt was commonly used in the past as a means to control weeds in asparagus (which is salt tolerant), salt can make the soil unsuitable for any other crops in the future.

When present, control diseases and insects. Keep an eye out for asparagus rust and other stem diseases and the asparagus beetle which can damage foliage. Though usually not severe, these problems can be managed with an appropriately timed fungicide or insecticide.

More information about growing asparagus and other garden crops can be found in the University of Illinois publication, *Vegetable Gardening in the Midwest*, Circular 1331, available at your local Extension office. Or, visit the *Watch Your Garden Grow* website at <http://www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/veggies/>.

# Question Corner

Answers provided by David Robson and Martha Smith, horticulture educators

*Q.* I have a bunch of bagworm bags on mature cedar and spruce trees. These have hung on since last year. Do those bags need to be removed? There are too many for picking off by hand.

*A.* As many as possible should be pulled off. The eggs for this year's crop of bagworms are in many of the bags; most will hatch out sometime in May. Not all bags will have eggs—if there is a noticeable hole in the bottom, chances are they were male bagworms, and no eggs will be present. But to be on the safe side, pull all the bags off that you can safely reach without climbing ladders. Discard the bags in the trash or bury them.

Pesticide applications at this time will do nothing to control the pest. The best time is after egg hatch and before the young larvae start to feed and develop their own protective bag. This is usually in mid-June or when Northern Catalpa is in full bloom.

Start watching the evergreens in May and early June. If you see the little caterpillars move and start forming, consider spraying with an insecticide labeled for bagworms. Read and follow the directions on the label. *Bacillus thuringiensis* is considered an organic bacterial toxin that will effectively control the bagworm caterpillars. Products that contain *kurstacki*, *spinosad*, or *cyfluthrin* are also effective.

*Q.* When is the best time to plant azaleas? Spring or fall?

*A.* Azaleas and rhododendrons are usually planted in the spring. Fall planting may not allow enough time for roots to establish and plants to develop winter hardiness.

Locate plants in a shaded location on the north, east or northwest side of a building. Choose a location that is protected from winter sun and winter winds.

One of the main causes of death for azalea and rhododendron is too much moisture, caused by improper planting.

Thoroughly work the soil bed. Add peat moss and compost to increase the soil's tilth and drainage. The peat moss will also make the soil more acidic, necessary for good growth. A pH around 5.5 is generally preferred.

Instead of planting the azalea or rhododendron at ground level, set the plant slightly higher, keeping 1/3 to 1/4 of the plant above ground. Mound the soil around the plant, sloping it gently away. This prevents the plant from sitting in too much water.



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Send your lawn and garden questions to:

The Green Thumb  
c/o Annette Campbell, editor  
University of Illinois Extension  
4202 Williamson Place, Suite 2  
Mt. Vernon, IL 62864

E-mail: [mdcampbe@uiuc.edu](mailto:mdcampbe@uiuc.edu)

# Upcoming Gardening Programs



University of Illinois Extension, Williamson County, is offering two gardening programs this month. Vegetable Gardening 101 is set for April 7, 6:30 P.M.

Ed Billingsley will discuss fertilizers, soil amendments, mulches, and varieties. He will answer individual questions as well.

The program is provided free of charge by U of I Extension and the Williamson County Farm Bureau. Advance registration is needed by April 4. Call 618-993-3304.

The second program is *Seasonal Care for the Home Landscape* set for April 16 at 1:30 P.M. Alice Hunt will offer tips and basic advice for year-round maintenance of lawns, trees, shrubs, flowers, and vegetable gardens. The program is free, but advance registration is appreciated.

Both programs will be held at the Williamson County U of I Extension Office, 1306 N. Atchison Avenue, Marion. To register, call 618-993-3304, or email your name, address and phone number to [williamson\\_co@extension.uiuc.edu](mailto:williamson_co@extension.uiuc.edu). If you need disability accommodations, please indicate when registering.



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