Horticulture Newsletter

May 5, 2026

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Horticulture and Natural Resources

Video of the Week:

As growth explodes across the landscape this spring, gardeners should be on the lookout for poison ivy plants that may turn up on their property. Poison ivy can be found growing as a shrub, vine, and groundcover, and each habit can cause skin irritation for those who are susceptible. This week's video provides tips for how to identify poison ivy in the landscape, and how to recognize the many growth habits poison ivy can take on: https://kansashealthyyards.org/component/allvideoshare/video/poison-ivy-check-for-leaves-of-three

Announcements:

May K-State Garden Hour:

Join us tomorrow (Wednesday, May 6th) for our next K-State Garden Hour webinar on "Natives vs. Cultivars - Making Informed Choices for Your Landscape" from Noon to 1pm. Learn how native plants and native plant cultivars impact the insects, birds, and other wildlife they support. Discover which plant options may be best for your landscape, and what current research reveals about the differences in ecological value between native plants and cultivars of native plants. Register to join us live, or view the recording afterwards online at: www.ksre-learn.com/KStateGardenHour

Garden Calendar:

- Direct seed sweet corn, cucumbers, squash, beans, and other warm season vegetables.
- Mound soil around potato plants to encourage tuber formation along the stems.
- Plant container gardens and hanging baskets using a good quality potting mix. Replace potting mix in containers at least every 2-3 years.

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- Begin pinching chrysanthemums for bushier, more well-branched plants.
- Withhold early summer waterings on lawns until irrigation is needed in order to promote more drought tolerant turfgrass this summer.
- Plant new trees and shrubs.
- Remove trunk wraps from trees for summer growth.
- Fertilize houseplants to promote summer development.

Vegetables:

Delay Planting Pumpkins And Winter Squash:

Although early May is the ideal time to start planting most of our warm-season crops such as tomatoes and peppers, it may be better to delay the planting of pumpkins and winter squash until mid- to late June. In Kansas, squash bugs are a significant pest to these two crops. By delaying plantings, we can help protect plants from one of their biggest pests.

From late-May through June, squash bugs are in search of suitable host plants, including pumpkin and squash plants, on which to lay their eggs. By delaying planting until around June 20, this allows crops to potentially escape attack from the first generation of squash bugs. Delaying planting can also result in a pumpkin harvest that aligns closer to Halloween.

There are at least two generations of squash bugs in Kansas each year. A second generation of squash bugs will usually hatch in August. Frequent scouting for eggs and nymphs, hand picking when insects are present, removing plant debris from the garden at the end of the growing season, row covers and insecticide use may all be necessary to protect plants from squash bugs in late June through August.

Visit our Squash Bug publication for more information on protecting pumpkins and squash from this insect pest: https://bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu/pubs/squash-bug-home-and-horticultural-pests_MF3308.pdf

Protecting Cole Crops From Imported Cabbageworm:

White butterflies floating around our gardens this summer may sound magical, but they also indicate danger for our vegetable crops. These white butterflies are often the adult of the imported cabbageworm, a common and often destructive pest of cruciferous (Cole) crops, including broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, kale, Brussels sprouts, and collards. This species is widespread, reproduces quickly, and has three generations per year in Kansas. Learning more about the imported cabbageworm and its lifecycle can help reduce damage to both quality and yield of our vegetable crops.

Imported cabbageworm undergoes complete metamorphosis (egg, larva, pupa, adult) and can complete a full life cycle in as little as three to six weeks, depending on temperature. Adult butterflies are white with black wing spots and are active during the day. Females lay eggs on the underside of leaves. Caterpillars emerge and begin feeding primarily on the undersides of leaves between veins, creating irregular holes in the leaf. Caterpillars are green in color, with a yellow stripe on the back that extends the length of the body and are covered with dense hairs. As caterpillars mature, feeding increases. Caterpillars reach up to one inch in length and can completely defoliate plants or tunnel into the heads of broccoli and cabbage. Mature caterpillars pupate inside a chrysalis, often located on the underside of leaves or in debris near host plants, and repeat the lifecycle.

The larval stage of the imported cabbageworm causes all the damage. Susceptibility varies among crops and cultivars. For example, female imported cabbageworm butterflies lay fewer eggs on red varieties of cabbage than on green varieties.

If imported cabbageworm butterflies are desired in the garden, no control is necessary. However, most gardeners prioritize protecting produce from caterpillar damage. Many beneficial insects, including ladybugs, green lacewings, assassin bugs, minute pirate bugs, and other parasitoids all feed on imported cabbageworm caterpillars and help suppress damage.

To further prevent damage, scout the undersides of Cole crop leaves weekly for the presence of imported cabbageworm caterpillars. Hand-pick caterpillars and use floating row covers to prevent egg-laying. Remove and dispose of plant debris after harvest and eliminate nearby cruciferous weeds which can harbor caterpillars. When insecticides are needed, thorough coverage of leaf undersides and repeat applications are critical. Use products that contain active ingredients such as Bacillus thuringiensis (BT), spinosad, malathion or methoxychlor.

Visit the newly released Imported Cabbageworm - Insect Pest of Vegetable Crops publication for more information about this insect and it's lifecycle: https://bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu/download/mf3727-imported-cabbageworm-insect-pest-of-vegetable-crops_MF3727

Flowers:

Deadhead Peony & Iris That Have Finished Blooming:

As peony & iris flowers fade from their springtime beauty, one important maintenance step is left – deadheading. Both peonies and iris benefit from deadheading, or the process of removing spent blooms after flowering is complete. Not only does deadheading improve the overall appearance of these plants, but it increases overall plant vigor. Deadheading prevents plants from spending energy on seed production and instead redirects that energy into developing next year's flowers.

Deadheading Peony: Peonies usually bloom with large individual flowers at the terminal ends of a stem, however, smaller flowers can sometimes develop on side stems. When peony flowers finish blooming, flowers quickly fall apart and petals drop to the ground. Peonies can be deadheaded when this occurs, or slightly before, when petals have dried and withered. To deadhead, follow the stem down below the spent flower to the first set of leaves, and use a sharp hand pruner to make the deadheading cut.

Deadheading Iris: Iris bloom on a tall flower stalk, with multiple flowers per stalk. Each flower stalk can produce multiple seed pods - one where each flower was previously attached. When deadheading, rather than removing individual seed pods, cut the entire flower stalk as low as possible. Ideally leave the leaf attached to the base of the flower stalk, however, removing a leaf or two will not harm the plant, and may improve the overall appearance.

Deadheading the spent blooms should occur within two weeks after flowering ends. When deadheading, avoid the urge to prune back leaves as well. After flowering it is important to allow as much peony and iris foliage to remain intact as possible. This will also help the plants photosynthesize and produce energy for future growth and flower development.

Checking For Healthy Root Systems In Potted Plants:

When purchasing plants, it is easy to be convinced to buy a plant based on what it looks like. Leaves, stems, flowers, shape, and color all make a unique sales pitch to customers. What is most important about a newly purchased plant is not what you see, however, it is what is in the pot – the plant's root system.

The roots are the foundation of a plant. A healthy root system grows a healthy plant. It is nearly impossible to have one without the other. Yet evaluating the root system is often overlooked when it comes to purchasing plants.

To evaluate a plant's root system, start by gently removing the plant from the pot. Place your hand over the top of the pot, with the stem of the plant passing between two of your fingers. With your palm and fingers over the rootball, turn the pot upside down and gently squeeze or tap the sides of the pot. The rootball should release and the pot can be easily slid up and off the plant. Never

remove plants from the pot by pulling on their stems. If you are not comfortable doing this step on your own, or need assistance, ask a store associate for help.

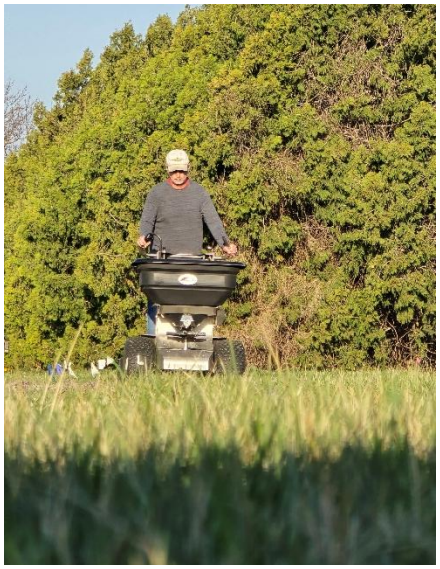
A healthy root system will typically have numerous white, fibrous roots, or at least roots with white tips. Some perennials and shrubs may naturally have darker colored roots (as opposed to white), however the roots should never be black, slimy, mushy or have a foul smell. These characteristics indicate an unhealthy root system, and a different plant should be selected.

On a healthy plant, the roots should be visible along the entire outside of the rootball and should reach the bottom of the pot. Some potting soil should still be visible in the rootball, however, otherwise the plant may be rootbound. If the root system is not visible or does not reach the bottom of the pot, this may mean the plant was recently transplanted into a larger pot and may need additional time for growth. Alternative plants should be selected if possible.

When bringing plants home and before planting, water by touch, not by calendar. If the soil feels dry an inch deep (down to the first or second knuckle on your finger), it is time to water. An alternative method is to water by weight, if practical. Lift the pot after a good, deep watering to determine the weight of the well-watered plant. Then use the "dry an inch deep" method to determine when it is time to water. Check the weight of the plant at that time. This will give you an idea of the difference between a well-watered plant and one that is ready for more water. The time between waterings will vary tremendously between spring, summer, and fall growing conditions. When watering, be sure to water thoroughly enough that some water flows out the bottom of the pot. This will help wash out excess salts that tend to accumulate within the potting soil.

Turf:

Fertilize Lawns in May:



May is an excellent time to consider fertilizing lawns. Fertilizer helps produce thick, green turf, but too much fertilizer, the wrong kind, or fertilizing at the wrong time may do more harm than good. Here is what you need to know about May fertilizations.

Many types of fertilizers are available. The only way to know which formulation is best for your lawn is to have your soil tested. In most cases, phosphorus and potassium should be applied only if indicated by the soil test results. Instead, focus on fertilizers high in nitrogen which will increase green color, density, and growth.

For Bermuda and Zoysia lawns (our warm season lawns), May fertilization is ideal to kickstart summer growth. By May most warm season grasses have emerged from dormancy, and are beginning active summer growth, making

May an ideal time to fertilize (however, if the threat of frost or freeze looms, wait until mid to late May before fertilizing). May fertilizations allow fertilizers to translate into carbohydrates, root growth, and tillers, not just short-lived leaf growth. To fertilize, apply a quick-release nitrogen fertilizer. These quick-release fertilizers will provide a nitrogen source that is quickly available to the turfgrass, and support growth for the next four to six weeks.

For Buffalograss lawns (also a warm season lawn), fertilize in late May to early June after stolon growth begins. Buffalograss is grown as a low maintenance lawn and normally is only fertilized once per year. To fertilize, apply a slow-release nitrogen fertilizer. These slow-release nitrogen sources will prevent excess leaf growth and promote controlled growth throughout the summer months.

For Tall Fescue, Kentucky Bluegrass, and our cool season lawns, consider a May fertilization only if you plan to irrigate through the summer months, and hope to keep the grass green all summer. Low maintenance cool season lawns, or lawns with no summer irrigation, will often go through a period of summer dormancy because of the summer heat and drought. As a result, these types of lawns do not need a May fertilization, instead wait until September to fertilize next.

May is a good time to fertilize irrigated cool season lawns because the springtime flush of growth begins to taper off, so the fertilizer will be less likely to cause excessive shoot growth than if applied in April. To fertilize, apply a slow-release nitrogen fertilizer. These slow-release nitrogen sources promote controlled growth throughout the summer months, which is desirable as the stressful summer weather approaches.

For all turfgrasses, the amount of fertilizer used largely determines the level of turf maintenance. Less fertilizer requires less watering, less mowing, and a lower maintenance lawn. More fertilizer produces a darker green color with more growth but also requires more mowing and watering. Apply up to a maximum of 1 pound of Nitrogen per 1,000 square feet with any May fertilizer application.

Visit our Fertilizing Kansas Lawns publication for more information on making your May fertilizer applications: https://bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu/pubs/fertilizing-kansas-lawns_MF2324.pdf

Trees & Shrubs:

Prune Evergreens Now As Growth Expands:

Evergreen plants have leaves that persist year-round, and in Kansas commonly include pines, spruces, firs, juniper, arborvitae, holly, boxwood, and yew. Evergreens typically hold two to three years' worth of needles at a time, and produce a flush of new growth each April to May, making now an ideal time to evaluate pruning needs.

In general, evergreens often need less pruning than most deciduous trees and shrubs. Pruning is often only needed to remove dead branches, direct growth, or to control overall shape or size.

Even though evergreens may not be frequently pruned, there are several important differences in how evergreens are pruned versus most plants. Unlike most deciduous trees and shrubs, most evergreens (especially junipers and pines) lack the ability to generate dormant buds on the interior of the plant. This means that if pruning is done too aggressively, and the center of the plant is exposed, no new growth is likely to occur from these areas (what is commonly referred to as the dead zone).

Pruning Pine: New growth occurs only once a year in pines from terminal buds at the ends of branches. As bud growth elongates in spring, the soft, new shoots with tightly clustered needles are referred to as candles. To control growth and increase plant density, pines can be pruned by cutting back 1/2 to 2/3 of the total candle length before the needles expand. Candles can be pruned using pruners or a knife, or pinched/snapped off with your fingers to avoid cutting the remaining needles (which can create a brown appearance on the tips). Pines produced limited side branching, so do not over-prune and avoid shearing.

Pruning Spruce & Fir: New growth occurs only once a year in spruces and firs from terminal buds at the ends of branches. Prune branches back to a side bud or side branch, without pruning past the needles. New growth can be pruned back by up to half the new growth. On larger trees, new growth occurs primarily in the upper portion of the tree, with minimal growth occurring in the lower levels. As a result, lower branches that are pruned heavily may keep this appearance for a long time. Dwarf and very slow-growing species are often intolerant of pruning and should be pruned only when necessary.

Pruning Juniper & Arborvitae: New growth may occur multiple times per year, beginning in April and often continuing through October. Growth emerges from terminal buds at the end of the branches. Pruning is best done in early spring, or as new growth emerges. Selectively prune individual branches back to an upward growing side branch. This helps hide pruning cuts and maintain a natural look. Remember, new growth only emerges from the growing tips at the ends of the branches. Do not prune back into branch wood without needles, as a permanent bare spot will likely remain.

Shearing evergreens, although common, is generally not recommended. It destroys the plant's natural shape and is labor intensive to maintain. If evergreens are pruned by shearing, ensure at least one inch of previous growth is left on the plant afterwards. This will help avoid exposing the dead zone on the interior of the plant and help the evergreen initiate new growth. Be sure to also ensure proper plant shape when shearing. The bottom portion of the plant should always be wider than the top portion of the hedge. This gentle pyramidal to gumdrop shape ensures light can reach the lower branches of the plant and reduces dieback of lower limbs.

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It is best to prune evergreens annually in the spring to control growth. If pruning has been neglected and plants have become overgrown, it may be better to replace overgrown evergreens instead of pruning them heavily.

Some evergreens, such as arborvitae, holly, and yew, may have the capacity to develop some secondary buds if pruned back into the dead zone. This practice should still be avoided, however, as recovery from such pruning may be slow, even taking multiple years, depending on the health of the plant.

Avoid pruning all evergreens after mid-August, as this often stimulates new growth that will not have adequate time to harden off before winter.

Miscellaneous:

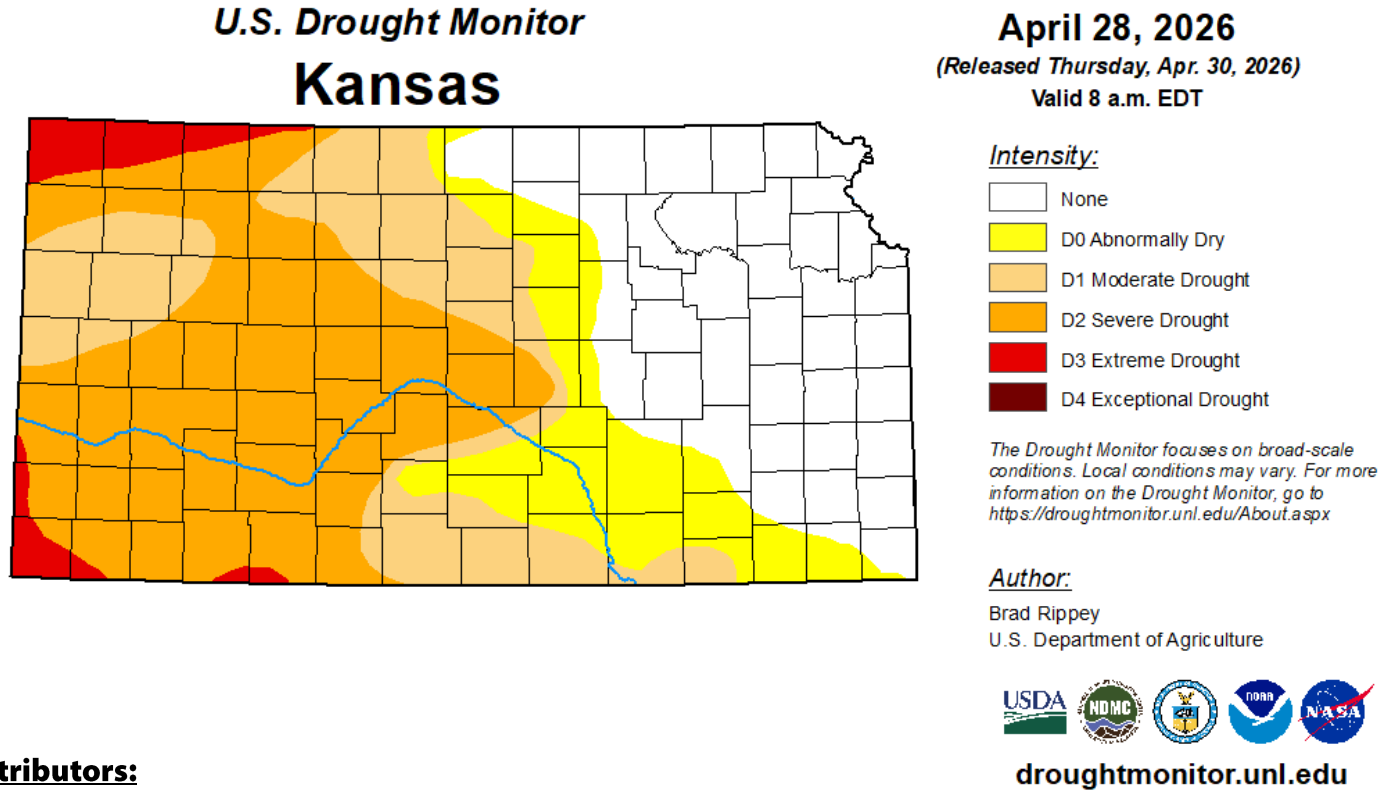
Spring Gardening Tips For Increasing Drought Preparedness:

Everyday gardening decisions play a critical role in determining how well our lawns, landscapes, and gardens withstand dry conditions during the growing season. Simple, routine practices—from irrigation habits to mowing height and soil management—can either strengthen or undermine our landscape's ability to tolerate drought. Knowing that periods of hot, dry weather, and even drought, occur regularly in Kansas, proactively building drought resilience is both practical and necessary. By making informed, intentional choices now, we can better prepare our landscapes for the inevitable challenges of dry conditions.

Here are eight steps that can be taken now to prepare our gardens for drought:

1. **Core Aerate Your Lawn:** Core aeration will help improve soil health by allowing moisture and oxygen to reach deeper into the soil, encouraging more extensive root growth. Aerate soils three inches deep, with cores spaced three inches apart.
2. **Prevent Weeds:** Weeding and applying pre-emergents now can prevent summer weeds from establishing which will compete for water with desirable plants in the lawn and garden.
3. **Apply Mulch:** Utilize a three inch thick layer of mulch to help conserve soil moisture & reduce weed competition.
4. **Raise Mowing Heights:** Increase the lawn's mowing height to improve the drought tolerance of your turfgrass. Low mowing heights stress turf, and require more water use to promote regrowth.
5. **Decrease Fertilizer Use:** Reduce fertilizer use, as the more fertilizer applied, the more water is required to sustain the excess growth caused by fertilization.
6. **Apply Minimal Irrigation:** Minimize watering practices in the spring to help develop deep root growth. Do NOT overwater in the spring. Most lawns and gardens will thrive on watering just once a week or less. More frequent irrigation can limit deep root growth in the spring, making plants more sensitive to drought when temperatures increase.

7. **Inspect Irrigation Systems For Leaks:** When turning on irrigation systems for the growing season, inspect all zones for leaks, overspray, or wasted water. Repair issues now so that a uniform pattern of water can be applied, minimizing irrigation run times and the amount of water used.
8. **Water Deeply When Irrigating:** Begin your year using best watering practices. Water deeply, and infrequently, soaking the ground 6-12 inches deep with each watering, and providing "mini droughts" in between waterings to increase the depth of plant roots. Water slowly so that the maximum amount of water can be absorbed, and runoff can be minimized.



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