FRUIT

Winterizing Strawberry Plants

Winter can be a difficult time for strawberries in Kansas. Plants need time to become adjusted to cold weather and will gradually become more cold resistant as fall progresses. Strawberry plants are able to withstand colder temperatures in the middle of the winter than in the fall before they have gone through much cold weather. For example, if temperatures suddenly plummet below 20 degrees F before the plants harden to the cold, they can be severely damaged. A drop to 15 degrees F may kill them. Hardened plants can withstand such temperatures with ease. This lack of hardening off may be a concern this year because of the unseasonably warm fall. If a sudden drop in temperature to below 20 degrees F is forecast, it may be wise to mulch the plants as you would for the winter. After the cold snap is over, uncover the plants so they may continue to harden off.

Normally, strawberries should be mulched for the winter around Thanksgiving. However, if temperatures stay abnormally warm, give plants another couple of weeks to become cold hardy before mulching.

Mulching plants helps protect strawberries not only from low temperatures but also from heaving damage. Heaving damage occurs when the alternate freezing and thawing common in Kansas winters heave plants out of the ground where they can die.

Wheat straw makes good mulch and is widely available. The straw should be spread over the plants to a depth of 3 inches. Shake the slabs of straw apart so there are no large compressed chunks.

This straw mulch not only helps protect the plants over winter but can also help avoid damage from late spring frosts by delaying blooming a few days in the spring. Mulch should be removed gradually in the spring as plants begin new growth. Remove enough so leaves can be seen.
Leaving some mulch in place keeps the berries off the ground and conserves moisture. Also, mulch left in the aisles helps protect pickers from muddy conditions. (WU)

**TURFGRASS**

### Dormant Seeding of Turfgrass

The best time to seed cool-season grasses such as tall fescue and Kentucky bluegrass is September because the turf has more time to mature before spring crabgrass germination and the heat stress of summer. But dormant seeding of turfgrass is sometimes used to help fill in bare spots of lawns that weren't overseeded in the fall. Dormant overseeding is done during the winter (December – February) when it is much too cold for germination.

As with any seeding program, good seed-soil contact is vital. Several methods can be used. One method is to seed when there has been a light snowfall of up to an inch. This is shallow enough that bare spots can still be seen. Spread seed by hand on areas that need thickening up. As snow melts, it brings the seed into good contact with the soil where it will germinate in the spring.

Another method is dependent on the surface of the soil being moist followed by some freezing weather. As moist soil freezes and thaws, small pockets are formed on the wet, bare soil that are perfect for catching and holding seed. As the soil dries, the pockets collapse and cover the seed. A third method involves core aerating, verticutting or hand raking and broadcasting seed immediately after. Of course, the soil must be dry enough and unfrozen for this to be practical.

With any of the above methods, seed germinates in the spring as early as possible. However, there will be some limitations on what herbicides can be used for weed control. Tupersan (siduron) can be used as a crabgrass preventer on new seedings even before they have come up. Also dithiopyr, found in Hi-Yield Turf and Ornamental Weed and Grass Stopper, can be used on tall fescue, Kentucky bluegrass and perennial ryegrass two weeks after germination. Dithiopyr is longer lasting and more effective than siduron. Other preemergence herbicides require that the turf be well established before application. (WU)

### Knotweed Control

Knotweed thrives in compacted soils, so a thorough aeration is the first step in control. This weed will not compete in a healthy lawn. Chemically, there are two options. Knotweed is an annual that germinates in late February or early March, so a
preemergence herbicide can be used in the late fall (about now). Pendimethalin (Scotts Halts), Surflan, Barricade, Dimension and XL are labeled for knotweed. (Note: Pendimethalin, Barricade and Dimension can be used on all Kansas turfgrasses, while Surflan and XL can only be used on tall fescue and warm-season grasses). The other option is to use a combination postemergence product such as Trimec, Weed-Out, Weed-B-Gon or Weed Free Zone after the knotweed has germinated but is still young.

If spring seeding is planned, your options are more limited. Buctril can be used on commercial sites and has a very short residual. It must be used on very young knotweed to get control. Trimec and others require a month before seeding. Obviously, don't use a preemergence herbicide if you are trying to get new seed established. For homeowners seeding in the spring, tilling will control knotweed adequately without using a herbicide. If seeding without tilling (e.g., overseeding using a slicer-seeder), then use a combination product such as one mentioned above just after the knotweed comes up in the spring, and be sure to wait at least a month before seeding. (WU)

**MISCELLANEOUS**

**Hosta Virus X**

The American Hosta Society and the University of Minnesota recently jointly authored a publication on Hosta Virus X (HVX) that includes results of a two-year research study. The research was performed by Dr. Ben Lockhart of the University of Minnesota. Dr. Lockhart was the plant pathologist who first identified the specific virus causing the disease. You may view the publication at:

[http://www.americanhostasociety.org/hostavirusxlockhart.html](http://www.americanhostasociety.org/hostavirusxlockhart.html)

Rob Mortko, Johnson County Extension Master Gardener and Vice President, Genus Hosta with the American Hosta Society, has highlighted some of the information gained from this research below.

- There are no hosta cultivars that are more (or less) resistant to HVX as had been previously reported. Hosta exposed to HVX while actively growing will likely become infected. However infecting a healthy hosta with HVX in the fall is very difficult as it is approaching dormancy. This would imply that hosta division would be better undertaken in the fall rather than in the spring.

- HVX is spread by sap to sap contact via cutting tools. Dishwashing detergent, 70% alcohol or a 10% solution of household bleach (1 part bleach and 9 parts water) are all effective in cleaning and disinfecting cutting tools. However, simply dipping the tool in the solution is not sufficient. Thorough scrubbing is required.

- After removing an HVX infected plant, a healthy hosta planted in the same location can be
infected up to two years later. (Note that two years was the duration of this research project.) No one was more surprised by this finding than Dr. Lockhart. Previously the general recommendation was to allow 4 to 6 weeks after removing a virused hosta before replanting. Based on this research another hosta should not be replanted in the same location.

Additional HVX research is planned to begin in the spring of 2011. (WU)

Houseplants Losing Leaves

Homeowners often become concerned about their houseplants this time of year because they look unthrifty and may even shed leaves. Most of this is the plant responding to low light levels. Not only is the day length shorter, but the angle of the sun means sunlight must travel through more atmosphere before it reaches us in the northern latitudes. Each of these factors means less light energy reaches our houseplants. Houseplants respond to this stress by stopping growth and dropping leaves if necessary. So how can we tell if leaves are being dropped due to stress or due to other factors? Normally, stress is the culprit if leaves are dropped throughout the plant so general thinning occurs.

The next question is what do we do about it? Well, you can add supplemental lighting or just wait until longer days and higher light levels allow the plants to recover. Unfortunately, people often decide the plant needs more fertilizer or water to perk it up. Remember the problem is low light, not a lack of fertilizer or water. Adding extra fertilizer or water won't help, and may actually harm, the plant. The needs of the plant need to be balanced. If there is plenty of sunlight, the plant can use more water and fertilizer. Under low light levels, the plant doesn’t require much fertilizer and the nutrients stay in the soil where they can build up and may eventually burn roots. Also, excess water can drown roots. Therefore, it is important to do a good job of watering and fertilizing during the winter. Only water when the soil is dry ½ inch deep in the pot. Eventually you can learn to judge whether a plant needs water just by weight. Also, reduce or eliminate fertilizing during the winter months. If the plant still looks thin in the spring, cut it back so it can put out new, thicker growth. Also, knock the plant out of the pot in the spring and make sure it isn't root bound. If it is, move it up to a larger pot. (WU)

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