Fertilize Spring-flowering Bulbs

October is the month that existing beds of spring-flowering bulbs such as daffodils and tulips are fertilized. If bulbs have been fertilized in the past, there is often plenty of phosphorus and potassium in the soil. It is best to use a soil test to be certain. If the soil needs phosphorus and potassium, use a complete fertilizer (such as 10-10-10, 9-9-6, etc.) at the rate of 2.5 lbs. per 100 square feet. This would equal 1 rounded teaspoon per square foot. If phosphorus and potassium are not needed, blood meal makes an excellent fertilizer. It should be applied at the rate of 2 pounds per 100 square feet or 1 teaspoon per square foot. Turf fertilizers such as a 27-3-3 or 30-3-3 can be used, but cut the rate by a third. (WU)

Questions on Ornamental Grasses

We are starting to receive questions on whether it is best to cut back ornamental grasses in the fall or spring. As a rule, ornamental grasses should not be cut back while green because they need time to move the energy found in the foliage into the roots. Even when browned by cold weather, most gardeners will leave the foliage until spring because of the interest it adds to winter landscapes. Early March is the preferred time to cut back these plants. However, dry foliage is extremely flammable and should be removed in the fall from areas where it is a fire hazard.
Another question we often receive is whether we can divide ornamental grasses in the fall. Spring is the preferred time because divisions done in the fall may not root well enough to survive the winter. (WU)

**Preventing Sunscald on Thin-Barked Trees**

Many young, smooth, thin-barked trees such as honey locusts, fruit trees, ashes, oaks, maples, lindens and willows are susceptible to sunscald and bark cracks. Sunscald normally develops on the south or southwest side of the tree during late winter. Sunny, warm winter days may heat the bark to relatively high temperatures. Research done in Georgia has shown that the southwest side of the trunk of a peach tree can be 40 degrees warmer than shaded bark. This warming action can cause a loss of cold hardiness of the bark tissue resulting in cells becoming active. These cells then become susceptible to lethal freezing when the temperature drops at night. The damaged bark tissue becomes sunken and discolored in late spring. Damaged bark will eventually crack and slough off. Trees will often recover but will need some TLC (especially watering during dry weather). Applying tree wrap from the ground to the start of the first branches can protect recently planted trees. This should be done in October to November. (WU)

**PESTS**

**Twig Girdlers**

We are starting to see damage from twig girdlers on oak as evidenced by fallen twigs up to 3 feet long. The beetle Oncideres cingulata is most likely the culprit. Other host trees include elm, linden, hackberry, apple, pecan, persimmon, poplar, sour gum, honey locust, dogwood, and some flowering fruit trees. This insect is distributed throughout the eastern United States from New England to Florida and as far west as Kansas and Arizona. Adults are long-horned beetles with a grayish-brown bodies that are stout and cylindrical. The larvae are also cylindrical with small heads and shiny exteriors. Larvae can be up to an inch long and are light brown to brownish-gray.

Girdled twigs often remain on the tree until the wind blows them down. Large infestations can result in a high percentage of girdled twigs. Though this may reduce the vigor and appearance of the tree, the overall effect on the tree's health is not severe. Twigs are unsightly and do not fall all at once, so clean up is a drawn out process.
This beetle has a one-year life cycle. Late in the growing season, the female deposits eggs in small scars chewed through the bark and then chews a continuous notch around the twig, girdling it. The notch is cut below the site of egg deposition apparently because the larva is unable to complete development in the presence of large amounts of sap. Girdled twigs die and fall to the ground where the eggs hatch. Girdled twigs look like a beaver has chewed on them, only in miniature. The outside of the twig is smoothly cut, but the center of the twig appears broken. The larvae begin feeding on dead wood inside the twigs the following spring and continue through most of the summer. Pupation takes place inside the feeding cavity. Development is completed during August when the adult emerges to repeat the cycle. Though adults feed on the bark of host twigs, damage is minimal until the female starts girdling.

Chemical control is impractical, so gather and dispose of fallen twigs in the fall or spring to destroy the larvae inside. Often, natural mortality is high because fallen twigs are excessively dry or carry too many larvae per twig. (WU)

**Woolly Worms**

Tiger moth is a catchall term for a large diverse group of moths belonging to the taxonomic Family Arctiidae (11,000 species worldwide). Many species have “hairy” caterpillars, which are popularly known as woolly bears or woolly worms. There are times when woolly bear populations seem to explode. And when they have completed their feeding, they wander about as they look for places to pupate. Early in the season pupation results in the next generation of moths, which then leads to the fall batch of wandering woolly bears seeking overwintering pupation quarters.

Overall, woolly bears are of no economic concern. A notable exception is the salt marsh caterpillar, which when occasionally occurring in large numbers, are potential pests of practically all garden and field crops.

The woolly bear caterpillar most often recognized by people is the banded woolly bear, which is the caterpillar of the Isabella Moth. The banded woolly bear’s claim to fame is that some people believe it is a harbinger of upcoming winter conditions — the longer the reddish/orange-colored band, the shorter and milder the winter — and conversely, the shorter the middle band, the longer and colder the winter. But longer or shorter in comparison to what standard? There is no standard, but rather changes in coloration as caterpillars grow and molt. There are also variations among individuals within the species, as evidenced by variations in appearance of banded woolly bear caterpillars from the same clutch of eggs. But there is nothing factual to establish a relationship between the appearance of banded woolly bears and impending winter conditions. (BB)
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