VEGETABLES

Last Tomatoes of the Season

Cold nights are increasing in frequency now that we are into October. If you have tomatoes, you may have some that are approaching maturity. Leave them on the vine until mature or until a frost is forecast. Tomatoes will ripen off the vine but must have reached a certain phase of maturity called the ‘mature green stage.’ Look for full-sized tomatoes with a white, star-shaped zone on the bottom end of the green fruit.

When harvesting fruit before a frost, separate tomatoes into three groups for storage: those that are mostly red, those that are just starting to turn, and those that are still green. Discard tomatoes with defects such as rots or breaks in the skin. Place the tomatoes on cardboard trays or cartons but use layers of newspaper to separate fruit if stacked. Occasionally a tomato may start to rot and leak juice. The newspaper will keep the juice from contacting nearby or underlying fruit. Store groups of tomatoes at as close to 55 degrees as possible until needed. (Ward Upham)

ORNAMENTALS

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 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. Dry foliage is extremely flammable and should be removed in the fall from areas where it is a fire hazard.

Another frequent question is whether to divide ornamental grasses in the fall. Spring is the preferred time because divisions planted in the fall may not root well enough to survive the winter. (Ward Upham)

**PESTS**

**Why Did the White-Lined Sphinx Caterpillar Cross the Road?**

It’s hard to miss these finger-sized, brightly colored worms as they cross the road by the hundreds. So why are they crossing the road? To get to the other side where there is more food, of course! Many producers are spraying herbicides in and around fields in preparation for planting fall crops. The white-lined sphinx eats Kochia, pigweed and various other weed species which are common nuisance species in fields and pastures.

Once the caterpillars’ food declines from the herbicide, the insects will migrate to the nearest green patch looking for food. Most of the time, these caterpillars will completely ignore crops and will concentrate on these weedy plant species. There are a few reports in the literature that recount brome grass as an occasional target of these caterpillars. Because of this, these caterpillars are generally regarded as beneficial!

The white-lined sphinx caterpillars are quite variable, but they usually will have a speckled head and dorsal stripe. The adults of the white-lined sphinx are very pretty moths that resemble hummingbirds. They can be spotted dashing about, stopping only for brief moments to nectar on flowers. These moths are common at dusk as well as during the day. (Sarah Zukoff)

**MISCELLANEOUS**

**Amending Soils with Sand**

Sand is sometimes suggested as an amendment material for clay soils. However, there is good reason to be cautious about using sand. In order for sand to be effective in breaking up a clay soil, sand grains must touch one another so there are pore spaces between grains that can hold air and/or water. If the grains do not touch, the clay fills in all the voids between the sand particles leaving no room for pores.
This is the same principle used to make concrete and the result is somewhat the same. You end up making a bad situation worse. So how much sand does it take for it to be effective? Normally, we consider about 80 percent sand to be sufficient. In most cases this makes the use of sand impractical. The addition of organic matter is a much better choice. (Ward Upham)

**Work Garden Soil in the Fall**

Fall is the preferred time to prepare garden soil for next spring’s vegetable garden. Spring is often wet making it difficult to work soil without forming clods that remain the rest of the season. Fall usually is drier allowing more time to work the soil when it is at the correct soil moisture content. Even if you work soil wet in the fall and form clods, the freezing and thawing that takes place in the winter will break them down, leaving a mellow soil the following spring.

Insects often hide in garden debris. If that debris is worked into the soil, insects will be less likely to survive the winter. Diseases are also less likely to overwinter if old plants are worked under. Also, garden debris will increase the organic matter content of the soil. Working the debris into the soil is easier if you mow the old vegetable plants several times to reduce the size of the debris.

Fall is an excellent time to add organic matter. Not only are organic materials usually more available in the fall (leaves, rotten hay or silage, grass clippings) but fresher materials can be added in the fall than in the spring because there is more time for them to break down before planting. As a general rule, add 2 inches of organic material to the surface of the soil and till it in. Be careful not to over till. You should end up with particles the size of grape nuts or larger. If you work garden soil into the consistency of flour, you have destroyed the soil structure. (Ward Upham)

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