Video of the Week: How to Sharper a Mower Blade

TURFGRASS

Keep Mower Blades Sharp

Lawn-mowing season is here. Remember that dull blades give the lawn a whitish cast. A dull blade does not cut cleanly but rather shreds the ends of the leaf blades. The shredded ends dry out, giving the lawn that whitish look. A sharp mower blade is even more important when the turf starts putting up seed heads next month. The seed head stems are much tougher than the grass blades and more likely to shred. Under normal use, mower blades should be sharpened about every 10 hours of use. (Ward Upham)

Orchardgrass in Tall Fescue Lawns

Orchardgrass often infests tall fescue lawns. Unfortunately, orchardgrass is lighter green and faster growing than tall fescue, so it is very visible. Homeowners complain of the light green tufts of grass wherever this weed has become established. Even worse, there are no herbicides that will kill the orchard grass without also killing the turf. About the only good thing about orchardgrass is that it is a bunch grass and does not spread.

Orchardgrass often comes in as a contaminant in grass seed, especially K-31 tall fescue. Buying good grass seed is the first line of defense against this weed. Orchardgrass is a pasture grass and therefore is not found in the “weed seed” portion of the seed label. Rather, orchardgrass will be listed as “other crop seed.” Try to buy grass seed that has 0.0% “other crop seed.”

Control options are few and painful. Use glyphosate (Roundup, Killzall Weed and Grass Killer, Kleeraway Systemic Weed and Grass Killer and others) to spot spray orchardgrass clumps. Any lawn grasses you hit will be killed, so keep the spots sprayed as small as possible. Wait until the spots have turned brown and then cut out the clumps and replace with a small piece of sod. Large numbers of orchardgrass clumps may mean it is more practical to kill the entire lawn and start over. This should be done in the fall rather than now.
For information on identification of orchardgrass, including images, go to the “Kansas Wildflowers & Grasses” website. (Ward Upham)

**VEGETABLES**

**Fertilizing Cole Crops**

If you planted cole crops such as cabbage, broccoli and cauliflower earlier this spring and made it through our earlier cold snaps, they will need a little fertilizer boost. These plants need to mature before summer heat arrives, so they must grow quickly while the weather is cool. A sidedressing of fertilizer about 3 weeks after transplanting helps plants continue to grow rapidly.

Use fertilizers high in nitrogen for sidedressing such as nitrate of soda or blood meal at the rate of 1/3 cup per 10 feet of row. You may also use lawn fertilizers that have close to 30 percent nitrogen such as a 30-3-4 or 29-5-4 but the rate should be cut in half to 3 tablespoons per 10 feet of row. Do not use lawn fertilizers that have weed killers or preventers. Fertilizer must be watered in if timely rains don't do that job for you.

We have a [sheet available](#) that gives recommendations on how to sidedress specific vegetable crops. (Ward Upham)

**Red Plastic Mulch and Tomatoes**

Plastic mulches have long been known to provide advantages for the vegetable grower including earlier fruiting, increased yields and weed control. More recently advantages have been noted for colored mulches over the more traditional black plastic mulch. With tomatoes, the color of choice has been red. Though normally there is an increase in production of marketable fruit with red mulch over black mulch, the amount of the increase varies with the type of year we have. There may be no increase during years of near-perfect weather or up to a 20% increase with less favorable growing conditions. A good average expected increase is about 12%.

So, how do you apply plastic mulch? Commercial growers have a mulch-laying machine that applies the trickle (drip) irrigation line and the mulch in one operation. Home gardeners must do this by hand. The first step after soil preparation is to place a trickle line near the center of where the mulch will lay as the plastic will prevent rainwater or overhead irrigation from reaching the plants. Then construct trenches for the outer 6 inches of the plastic mulch. This allows the center of the bed to be undisturbed with the edges of the mulch draping down into the trench. Fill the trenches to cover the edges of the mulch. This will prevent wind from catching and blowing the mulch. If the soil has been tilled, a hoe is all that is needed to prepare the trenches. (Ward Upham)
Rhubarb Harvest and Seedstalks

Rhubarb, like asparagus, is a perennial vegetable. It is harvested for the leaf stem, which is also called a petiole. Some years rhubarb will produce large, hollow-stemmed seedstalks that arise from the center of the plant. These should be broken or cut out as they appear so that energy will go into plant vigor rather than seed production. It will take several weeks for all the seedstalks to appear so be vigilant in removing them. Newer varieties of rhubarb are selected for vigor, bright red-colored stalks and less of a tendency to produce seedstalks than the older types. (Ward Upham)

FRUIT

Fertilizing Strawberries and Brambles

Most garden soils in Kansas have adequate levels of all nutrients other than nitrogen if the area has been fertilized in the past. However, it is recommended that a soil test be done to be sure of the nutrient needs of your fruit planting. If the soil test recommends phosphorus and potassium, use a 10-10-10 fertilizer or 12-12-12 instead of what we recommend below but triple the rate. For example, instead of ½ cup per 10 feet of row, use 1.5 cups per 10 feet of row.

Strawberries (June-Bearing): June-bearing strawberries are not fertilized in early spring as this can make the berries soft and more prone to rot. Fertilize at renovation and again in late August to early September. In most cases, strawberries need primarily nitrogen, so the recommendations are for a high nitrogen fertilizer such as a 27-3-3, 29-5-4, 30-3-3 or something similar. Though recommended for lawns, these fertilizers will also work well for strawberries as long as they do not contain weed killers or crabgrass preventers. Apply ½ cup for every 10 feet of row. Note: For more information on renovating strawberries, see page four at http://www.bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu/pubs/mf598.pdf

Strawberries (Everbearing or Day-Neutral): Fertilize in the spring as growth starts and again in early August. Use the rates recommended for June-bearing strawberries. Everbearing (dayneutral) strawberries are not renovated.

Brambles (Blackberries and Raspberries): In most cases, brambles need primarily nitrogen, so use a high nitrogen fertilizer such as a 27-3-3, 29-5-4, 30-3-3 or something similar unless a soil test directs otherwise. Though recommended for lawns, these fertilizers will also work well as long as they do not contain weed killers or crabgrass preventers. Apply ½ cup for every 10 feet of row. Fertilize in spring as growth begins. (Ward Upham)
Will I Have Peaches This Year?

If your peach trees were in bloom during one of our earlier cold snaps, then likely not. It looks like we may have a peach crop this year in the Manhattan area as long as we don’t receive any additional frosts. Actually 28 degrees is the temperature at which we start losing peach buds if they are in full bloom. Unopened buds are more cold tolerant. So how can you tell if your peach buds are still alive?

To check for low temperature injury to fruit buds or blossoms, use a sharp knife or razor blade and cut the bud in half longitudinally. If the area in the center is white to cream color and the style of the pistil is has not darkened then no damage has been done. But if the center in several buds or blossoms is dark brown or black, it has been killed. See last week’s newsletter for a photo of a living and dead bud. (Ward Upham)

PESTS

Termites or Ants

Both termites and ants are able to swarm and may have wings during part of their lives. Since these insects are close to the same size, people often misidentify flying ants as termites. Since flying ants do not attack wooden structures like termites, it is helpful to be able to tell the difference.

Fortunately, there are several differences that can easily distinguish the two. For example, ants have a thin waist; the waist of a termite is thick. Also, ants’ antennae are elbowed, while termites' are curved. Thirdly, termites have two pairs of wings that are of equal length. Ants also have two pairs of wings, but theirs are of unequal length. Homeowners who find signs of termite activity should shop for a reputable pest control firm. (Ward Upham)

Common Asparagus Beetle

If you are growing asparagus, then it is that time of year to be aware of the only insect pest of asparagus; the common asparagus beetle, *Crioceris asparagi*. Adult beetles are 1/4 inch long. The body is metallic blue to black with red margins and six cream-colored markings (Figure 1). Adults emerge from the soil in early spring and fly to new asparagus shoots where they mate and feed. Females lay up to 30 eggs on the end of spear tips as they emerge from the soil. Larvae hatch from eggs after about a week, migrate onto the ferns, and commence feeding. The larvae look like a small slug. They are wrinkled, 1/3 inch in length, and olive-green to gray with black heads and legs. Larvae feed for approximately two-weeks and then drop to the ground, burrow into the soil, and form a yellow pupa. After several weeks, adults emerge and start feeding. Common asparagus beetles overwinter underneath plant debris, loose bark, or hollow stems of old asparagus plants. The life cycle can be completed in eight-weeks. There are two generations in Kansas.
The adults and larvae feed on asparagus spears and can defoliate ferns if populations are extensive. Larvae consume leaves and tender buds near the tips, which leaves scars that eventually turn brown. Damage caused by larvae interferes with the plant’s ability to photosynthesize (manufacture food); thus, depleting food reserves for next year’s crop.

The plant protection strategies that can be implemented to reduce problems with common asparagus beetle populations include: applying insecticides; handpicking eggs, adults, and larvae and placing into a container with soapy water; and/or removing any plant debris after the growing season to eliminate overwintering sites for adults. Insecticides should be applied as soon as common asparagus beetles are present, and again in late summer through early fall to kill adults before they overwinter. Thorough coverage of all plant parts is important in suppressing populations.  (Raymond Cloyd)

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