

2020 Winter Gardening Tips

Watering

The winter months can be dry.... really dry. While we may not see green grass growing or trees blooming, their root systems are still viable and need moisture. Granted, the need for water is not as great as during the active growing season, your lawn needs about ½" of water per week during dry and/or windy spells. Be sure to remember to disconnect your hose during freezing weather!

Ice Melt Products

These products can be life savers and do thaw the ice, but they can also have some undesirable effects. They may cause corrosion of concrete and metal, water pollution, and may harm plants. Most of the chemicals marketed today to melt ice are actually just a salt compound that lowers the freezing point of water. All are useful if the labeled directions are followed carefully.

The active ingredient of sodium chloride is the cheapest and most widely used for ice melt. But, it has a significant potential for corrosion and plant damage in high concentrations. Calcium chloride and urea have similar risk for corrosion but are less harmful to plants. Calcium magnesium acetate does not corrode or pollute water and does not harm plants but is the most expensive.

So, what do you do? The ideal approach to ice and snow is to remove as much as possible by hand. Not exactly what you wanted to hear, right? Then, if you feel it is needed, apply an ice melt chemical to help remove the last layer. Avoid the "more is better" mindset and always follow label directions. Mixing sand in a 3-to-1 ratio with ice melt can reduce the need for chemicals and provides added traction to feet and tires. Finally, harmful effects of these chemicals may be minimized by hosing the salt off plants when it is possible.

Christmas Tree Disposal Options

- For hard-core gardeners: Trim the smaller branches and place in the garden as mulch or in the compost pile as a source of green material. It will decompose.
- For fisherman, sinking a bundle of evergreen trees creates a “hot-spot” or “magnet” in your favorite fishing hole. Crappies love them!
- For environmental protection: Take it to the City of Tulsa’s Green Waste Site located at 2100 North 145th East Ave. This site is open 7 days a week, 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., excluding city holidays. Only green waste is accepted such as trees, limbs, and leaves. All are shredded for mulch which is available to the public. Non-organic materials (e.g. trash, decorations, lights, metal tinsel, and flocking are not allowed.
- For ease: Place the tree at curbside for collection by the City of Tulsa. Articles in the newspaper and online generally provide more information regarding proper bundling and pick-up dates.

Fireplace Ashes

The use of fireplace ashes in gardening is a rather complicated subject. While it is commendable to recycle all possible waste materials back into the environment, applying ashes should only be done with considerable forethought and planning. A little chemistry lesson is in order so bear with me.

First, ashes resulting from the burning of standard firewood vary as to chemical content. That content depends on the type of wood that was burned and how hot the fire. On average, ashes contain up to 22% of undesirable chemical salts which can convert your soil to a high-salt area. This alone can make the soil unfriendly to plants for years.

Secondly, fireplace ashes are highly alkaline with an average pH of 11.6 which is in the range of household bleach. This reduces the acidity of the soil perhaps to a range unfavorable for most plants, especially vegetables. While there is some nutrient value in ashes (~ 6% potassium), most gardens already have more than enough potassium while containing little phosphorus and absolutely no nitrogen.

So, since the use of ashes can have a long-term effect on plants and poses a chance of damaging the soil, it may be wise to forego the use of ashes in your garden or lawn altogether.

Winter Wildlife Survival

As the temperature dips, birds acquire adaptive behaviors to survive cold nights, such as losing up to 15% of their total body weight. Some grow additional feathers to thicken their insulation. Others do feather fluffing to puff out down feathers thus creating air pockets to trap body heat. Still, others lower their metabolic rates to cause body temperature to decline and heart rate to decrease so fewer calories are burned on cold winter nights. At a time when caloric requirements are increasing, the food supplies (insects, seeds, weeds, fruit, and nuts) are being eaten rapidly and become scarce in our landscapes. And, with freezing temperatures, no water is available at a time when dehydration is more critical than starvation. A few things we can do to help:

- Provide continuous filling of bird feeders with nyjer/thistle, black oil sunflower seed, and suet which birds come to rely on throughout the winter.
- Water in a liquid state can be maintained by using heated birdbaths or by placing heating elements in existing baths. The heaters are thermostatically controlled when temperatures drop below freezing.
- Nesting boxes should be cleaned out and left for some species like the black chickadee which roost together at night or on cold, windy days.
- Utilize plants (e.g. junipers) that provide nutritional berries. Perennials with seed heads, herbaceous shrubs that provide protection from the cold, and old rotting limbs can provide food and roosting sites for many species.
- Put off some fall clean-ups until spring when temperatures begin to rise. Leaves left on garden beds provide warmth and food for beneficial insects and amphibians.

So, who doesn't want less work to do now and, instead, just enjoy our beautiful feathered allies who give us beauty and help us control insects all season long?