Pest Corner

February, 2007

February is a great time to check our New Year's gardening resolutions. You might re-think old planting habits; question old beliefs; and expand our knowledge about renewable plant materials.

The information below was extracted from articles by Don Tapio (GHCo. Extension Agent) and Linda Chalker-Scott, Ph.D., Extension Urban Horticulturist and Assoc. Prof., Puyallup Research and Extension Center, WSU.

Some notions worth re-considering in 2007 are:

"**Peat moss is an environmentally friendly organic amendment essential for many horticultural purposes**".
Peatlands are biodiverse ecosystems with important environmental functions in water quality and carbon storage. Degraded peat lands are environmentally non-functional, resulting in increased water loss, poorer water quality, and decreased storage of atmospheric carbon. Peat moss is a non-renewable resource; its replacement takes centuries.

Instead, consider using: Composted bark; yard and agricultural wastes; aged livestock manures; current waste products (include brewing waste, coconut coir, olive mill waste, pulp and paper sludge, municipal solid waste and sewage sludge, and even foam cubes). These materials are used in the rooting and/or production of many plant materials, including vegetables, annual flowers, houseplants, woody ornamentals, and timber species.

"**Landscape fabric provides permanent weed control for ornamental landscapes**".
Geotextiles start degrading in the first year if unprotected from sunlight. Thus, these fabrics are not effective weed control solutions for permanent landscapes. Any organic matter or soil on top of the fabrics will hasten their colonization by weeds; this precludes covering the fabric with anything but inorganic mulch like pebbles. It also requires continued maintenance to keep the fabric free of debris. Weeds will eventually grow on top of and through these fabrics, making their removal difficult. The plant roots can also colonize fabrics, and they are damaged when the fabrics are removed. Organic mulches are better for permanent landscape installations as they can be reapplied throughout the life of the landscape without damaging the existing plantings.

"**Seaweed extracts reduce disease, improve production, and increase stress resistance in landscape plants**".
Sales literature praises the effectiveness of seaweed extracts as soil conditioners, disease suppressants, and stress reducers. Seaweed extracts contain plant growth regulators, which, like other rooting products, can stimulate root growth in cuttings and transplants. Ignore the ads! Seaweed extracts have NO reliable effect on plant production or resistance to disease and environmental stress in field conditions. Variations in plant materials and environmental conditions are greater determinants of plant health than applications of seaweed extracts. Seaweed extracts for landscape use represent a poor use of natural resources; more so, when these are taken from sensitive coastal ecosystems.

Remember that nursery-planting recommendations are not always up-to-date.
We have all read the "Dig a hole twice as wide and twice as deep as the plant's root ball." **The correct size is**: The hole should be at least twice as wide, but no deeper than the root mass!

What about this? "Mix excavated soil with sand, peat moss, rotted manure or other soil amendments. Current thought is that amending native soil prior to installing permanent landscapes (i.e. woody plant material) is not a sustainable practice; instead, top dress with organic mulch.

Planting container plants.
Do you still gently tap the sides of the container and slip the plant out, being very careful to keep the root ball intact? Many of us have done this! The truth is that container plants should be bare-rooted at installation to remove potting media and to correct root problems.

Planting Bare-root Trees.
Fruit trees usually are sold bare root, so place the roots over a low mound of soil in the hole. Remove the burlap and any other material that came around the roots. It is very important to plant a fruit or nut tree at the right level. Try planting the tree at the same level that it was growing in the nursery. (a close inspection might reveal the slight change in color marking the root crown line). Make sure the graft union is above ground; if it is not, the rootstock will produce shoots that may overpower the grafted or budded stock. The scion (grafted variety) also may produce roots that lessen the effect of the rootstock.

Submitted by Cecilia
