

My peonies don't bloom

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. One of the regular complaints I get every spring is from folks who's peonies have quit blooming. All too often the conversation moves to where the concern is that the peonies aren't blooming because they don't see any ants on the peonies.... Okay, it's time to put that one to rest once and for all. First of all, peonies stop blooming because they are too deep in the ground. Peony crowns, all that stuff that's underground, have buds or eyes at the top of the crown. These eyes are where this year's stalks grow from. Plants do best with these eyes are 1 to 2 inches below the soil surface. If the eyes are more than 2 inches deep, the buds fail to form and the stalks don't have any blooms. Dirt seems to collect at the base of peony plants so every couple years, in the fall, get a garden rake and rake some of that soil away. You also need to fertilize the plants right after blooming to build up lots of food reserves for next year. Okay, back to the ants. Have you ever looked at a big fat peony flower bud just ahead of blooming. It exudes plant sap or what we often call honeydew. This sap tends to be high in sugar and the ants harvest this and take it back to the colony, often not to eat, but to grow a fungus on that they do eat. The ants are present because there is food present. If the plants are too deep, there are no flower buds. If there are no flower buds there is no sap. If there is no sap, no food, there will be no ants. So yes, there is a correlation between ants and flowers on the peonies, but most folks have it backwards. No ants because no flower buds, not the other way around! This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte.

Gardening in late April

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. Time and spring is moving fast. Last week I talked about mid April planting and now we need to think about late April and early May plantings in the vegetable garden. NO, it's still too early for tomatoes, sweet corn, peppers and egg plant. But we can start planting melons, from seed, sweet corn, pumpkins and maybe okra if you want to gamble a little. Beans, both snap and Lima should probably be held off for another week as well. But many of those can be planted sequentially over a 4 to 6 week period to really spread out the harvest. Cucumbers and squash need to wait another week to ten days, and winter squash - acorn, butternut and Hubbard, as well as the very tender sweet potatoes, really need to wait until very late May or even early June. I have a lot of gardeners that every year become frustrated trying to grow just a small amount of sweet corn. Sweet corn, to be very blunt, is a crop that needs to be grown in large patches. I'm talking 4 to 8 rows wide and 50 or more feet long. The reason is very simple, pollination. Corn is an odd plant with the male flowers, the pollen producers, at the top of the plant and the female flowers - the ear and the silk, half a plant removed. Pollination is wind driven in corn. Early in the morning, the first little breezes hit the tassels, the pollen is jarred loose and falls down to land on the silks. Think about wind in Kansas, it usually isn't gentle. So if you just plant one row or two rows of sweet corn, most of the pollen goes to the neighbors yard. With blocks of 4 or more rows, you can obtain proper pollination!

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Weed control in gardens

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. When I visit with first time gardeners I always encourage them to start with a small garden, 2 or 300 square feet. I do this because I know that if they turn the entire backyard into a garden, by the middle of July they are going to be overwhelmed by the task of keeping the weeds under control. When I was growing up, we had what my Dad called a Santa garden. Nothing but hoe-hoe-hoe! You need to keep gardens weed free because weeds harbor insect pests and they take the nutrients and water and even sunlight away from the plants we are trying to grow. Hoeing is a very common and time honored tradition of keeping weeds down as is hand pulling weeds. There is also the option of applying mulches. Some people use straw or other organic mulches. You can use grass clippings but make sure you haven't sprayed chemicals for the past couple of mowings and then be sure to dry the clippings totally dry before you put them in the garden. Some people will even use newspapers in the garden. By shading the soil you help reduce the number of weeds that will grow and you also reduce the amount of water lost from the soil. One other technique for reducing weed competition is through the use of weed preventers. These are herbicide granules that are applied to the soil surface and then activate with water or by hoeing or raking in. Most of these can't be applied until seeded crops have germinated and gotten a few leaves, and they won't stop all the weeds, but they can be a big help in reducing how many weeds you have to deal with by other methods! This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte.