

An Early Spring?

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. I don't really care what the groundhog says and it doesn't really matter much to me that February was over 7 degrees above normal. None of this really impacts what the plants are doing nor is it an indication that our last spring frost will be earlier or later than normal. This is one of those years that I got caught. I did not get my peonies cleaned off last fall and now they are starting to grow again. Sooo, I've been carefully cleaning the old growth off the past couple of days. Sure, there may be occasional breakage or clipping of a new shoot, but in the long run, other than thinning out the flower buds, you aren't going to damage the plant. Same thing with asparagus and rhubarb. All of these early season plants are starting to grow and if we didn't get the old growth cleaned off last year, we need to do it now. What I don't want to see is a lawn mower being run over these things to shred up the old growth from last year. All of these plants, especially peonies, can have issues with leaf diseases. These diseases overwinter on last year's dead foliage. If you just mow over the top of them, the area looks better but you've shredded all those disease spores and scattered them all over the place. You need to carefully cut that old stuff off at ground level and remove it from the area, preferably somewhere that it will go in the trash or be burned as soon as possible so that those disease spores are totally removed from the area. It may not be the easiest way to do it, but once again the easiest way to do things for you, is frequently not the best way to do things for the plants! This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte.

Planting Potatoes

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. St. Patrick's Day is the traditional day to plant potatoes. I find this laughable on several levels seeing as how potatoes did not originate in Ireland, they originated in the Andes mountains of Peru. Anyway, sometimes planting on March 17th works for potatoes, sometimes it's actually too late and other years it may be too early. I really want to plant when we have a 50 degree soil temperature, but as long as it's at least 45 degrees, you'll be okay. We started hitting consistent soil temperatures in that range late last week. You want to buy good quality seed potatoes and then cut them into planting pieces 2 to 3 days ahead of planting so that the freshly cuts surfaces can suberize or toughen. Planting freshly cut potatoes that haven't suberized over can result in plant loss from rot. Each seed piece needs to have at least one eye and weigh 1½ to 2 ounces. This provides adequate food to get that new sprout out of the ground and into the sun. Plant seed pieces 1 to 3 inches deep and 8 to 12 inches apart in rows 3 feet apart. Remember that potato production will occur along the stem ABOVE the seed potato piece so as the plants grow you need to hill the soil up at least 4 to 6 inches high around the plants as they grow. Even though you can plant them early, just keep in mind that it can be 3 to 4 weeks before you see the new shoots emerging from the soil. Potatoes are heavy feeders of nitrogen and phosphorus so use a well balanced garden fertilizer at planting time and follow up with a couple rounds of side dressing as the plants grow on through the spring. This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte.

Nightcrawlers in lawns

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. We all know what nightcrawlers are, they are a very large earthworm. Surprisingly to many people, nightcrawlers are not native to Kansas nor even to North America. They arrived from Europe during the early days of European settlements in North America. We have many native earthworms and many are at risk in the presence of nightcrawlers. That little trivia aside, we also know that earthworms of all kinds are inherently good for the soil. They eat their way through the soil creating various size tunnels that aid air and moisture exchange in the soil. When soil is compacted they help break up that compaction or at least make macropores where roots and water can penetrate deeper into the soil. Worms eat their way through the soil, digesting organic matter along the way. Since nightcrawlers are deep burrowers, sometimes making burrows as much as 6 feet deep, they have to do something with some of that dirt that they are moving through. They often go back to the surface and deposit what are called middens which is a mixture of plant residue and worm feces. The problem is that these piles of middens at the soil surface can be over an inch tall and can make the ground very rough to the point that it is hard to walk on and really tough to run a lawnmower out of. While certain lawn insecticides we use for grub control are toxic to earthworms, nothing is really registered for earthworm control since earthworms are inherently beneficial. Often the best thing to do is to try to rake and knock down the largest worm mounds and then just hope for the best. This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte.