

Early Season Fruit Tree Care

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

If you have fruit trees in your home garden then February is the time to start tending to their needs. Pruning is the first thing that comes to mind and we'll address that in next week's column. But for right now I want to talk about early season pesticide treatments, specifically dormant season treatments for scale insects and diseases.

For insect control in the fruit, that spraying season starts just after petal drop and continues every two weeks for several months; a topic for another day. Scale insects are not a common problem on fruit trees in home gardens, but they do show up occasionally. Check your tree over for scaly looking things on branches that you can scrape off with your fingernail. If you find some of these, put some in a plastic bag and bring them in to me to confirm the identification and what control you may need to apply.

Many things that we can spray for on our fruit trees are of questionable need or value in the long run. Most home orchards don't have fruit crops in enough successive years that we have a lot of insect issues pop up. I have a couple of apple trees and a pear tree and I really don't ever spray for insects. I'm just not that concerned about them and the years that I do have a good fruit crop, I don't have that many worms in the fruit but what I can't just cut around the few that I do find. However, leaf diseases are another story. We have three that we are probably going to see every year and need to take preventative steps to reduce their severity.

Leaf diseases can not be cured once a leaf is infected, they need to be prevented. Apple trees have two diseases that need attention whether you have a fruit crop or not. Cedar apple rust and apple scab are present to some degree every year. Both can severely defoliate a tree if it is a susceptible variety and left untreated. We won't start treating these until about blossom time, however, so just stay tuned on those. But if you are thinking about planting some new apple trees, either flowering crabapples or fruiting varieties, plant ones that are resistant to both diseases. We have bulletins that list disease reaction on apples and flowering crabapples.

The one thing that we really need to be paying attention to now, well in advance of leaf emergence or even bud break, is peach leaf curl. Peach leaf curl is a disease that is already out there on your peach trees just waiting for the chance to infect your peach tree's leaves. Peach leaf curl infects the leaves just as the buds break in the spring and the leaves start to emerge. At first you don't notice anything but after several weeks all of a sudden you notice that the leaves are distorting and starting to get a puckered up reddish yellow look. The leaves eventually die and fall off. While new leaves well emerge, the tree, and any fruit, suffers. Year after year of untreated infection can weaken the tree, diminish fruit production and shorten its life.

February and early March, prior to significant bud swell and bud break is when we need to be treating. You need to use a fungicide labeled for peach leaf curl. The most readily available fungicide for peach leaf curl is chlorothalonil which is found in several common home disease control products. You want to choose a calm sunny day with the temperatures above 40 degrees and apply a good thorough soaking spray to the entire tree. I would wait a couple of weeks and do it again just to make sure you achieved good coverage. But don't wait too long. If we have a warm spell and those buds start to break, the leaves can get infected before you've had a chance to protect them!