

Internet Myths and Nonsense

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

The internet is an amazing place. You literally have all the information in the world at your fingertips. If you have a smart phone you can access nearly any piece of information from anywhere at any time, assuming you have a good signal! Yet people time and time again fall for some of the biggest crocks of nonsense and mis-information possible. I am simultaneously greatly amused and infuriated with the garbage information that is out there and how many people believe it. So let's tackle a couple that have been popular on many sources of late, including, and especially Facebook, that great perpetrator of misinformation.

Let's start with basic botany. A fruit is essentially a matured ovary that contains the seed(s) of that plant. From a botanist's point of view, an apple, melon, tomato, pepper, pea or bean pod, are all fruits. Nutritionists use the word fruit in a different manner so don't let that throw you. With all of this in mind let's think about some of the mis-information floating around about male or female bell peppers, or male and female watermelons. If you think about it, there are no male fruits. Period.

Let's think back on all those posts about how to choose a female watermelon instead of a male watermelon because they'll be sweeter. Since the melon is a developed or matured ovary, then they are all female. The determining factor of whether a bell pepper has 2, 3 or 4 bumps on the bottom comes down to genetics, growing conditions and pollination. What dictates the flavor, the sweetness, all the characteristics, desirable or undesirable, of any plant food product, comes down to genetics, growing conditions, how the producer cared for it before, during and after harvest.

The pollen source, with a very few exceptions, has no impact on the fruit qualities. If bell peppers are pollinated by jalapeno peppers, they will not be hot. If the seeds are grown out, the next generation may be hot, but not the pepper carrying those seeds. Many species of plants have separate male and female flowers on the same plant. Corn and vine crops of all kinds are classic examples. But the male flowers, once they've shed their pollen, die and that's it.

The next one that I saw way too much of this spring was home made weed killers. The basic recipe was vinegar, dish soap and epsom salts. The claims for this are numerous and highly touted...on the internet. Any weed killer, any pesticide at all, has to go through rigorous testing before it can be labeled and sold. We know what happens to it in the environment. When you start making your own concoctions, you don't know what's going to happen to them.

Have you ever looked at the chemicals in liquid dish soap? I can't pronounce half those words. Epsom salt is magnesium sulfate. It's nothing like table salt, sodium chloride. If you dump enough table salt on a piece of ground, you will kill everything growing there for this year and years to come. How many people don't have Epsom salt and try using table salt? Straight vinegar, especially commercial grade, 20% acid vinegar, sprayed on plants will burn the foliage down quickly. On small seedlings it might kill them. But on well established perennials and grasses, it's probably not going to give you lasting control.

The bottom line here is that there's a lot of garbage on the internet. Anyone can post anything. There is no quality control. Before you start going down the road that some of these things will lead you, do some follow up with trusted sources, like the Extension Office, that know what's going on. If it's plant or nature related, give me a call so I can literally keep you out of the weeds and help you accomplish what you want to do, safely.