

Beware the Internet Expert

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

The internet is potentially an amazing resource. So many information portals. Literally a vast amount of the knowledge of the world lies at your fingertips for amazingly rapid retrieval. The internet has allowed us to stay sane during the quarantine. It allows us to step into the cartoon world of the Jetson's and have video chats with almost anyone anywhere around the world. If you have a question or want to learn how to do almost anything, you can probably find a video on YouTube about it. Then there's Facebook, or for that matter nearly any of the social media platforms. Sign up for an account and in minutes you can share photos of your garlic crop, your child's first steps or last night's meal disaster. The internet truly is amazing.

But there is a downside to all of this amazing technology. While there's an amazing amount of good information out there, there is even more bad information and mis-information. For less than \$40 you can have a domain name and a website in less than 24 hours. There's no agency checking the claims you make on your website. As long as they don't violate existing laws and regulations, you can claim almost anything. You can share your experiences and you instantly sound like an expert. And believe me, there are a lot of self proclaimed experts out there. If something worked once for them, or even if they think it worked, they are now an expert and it will work for everyone. Unfortunately that's not how it works.

I did a research project in graduate school, then had to write, present, and defend my thesis to meet the requirements for my master's degree. It then took another three years, numerous reviews and tweaks to take that information and get it through what's known as the peer review process to get it published in a professional journal. Many of you know that several years ago I co-authored a book on Kansas birds. A big book. That was a four year process with edits upon edits and revisions before the publisher allowed it to be published. Both of those pieces of published work are documented with citations so anything written in it can be followed up so readers can know where that information came from. That's the scientific process that has been around for a couple of centuries.

But now someone can get on the internet and tell you to place an antacid tablet under your tomato plants and you won't have blossom end rot. It doesn't work by the way. There's no one approving that information. Literally if you think it, you can write it. Then let's add on, especially in the lawn and gardening world, the vast differences in soil and climate across the state and especially across the country. What works in Baltimore or Boston is different than what works in St. Louis or even Kansas City. The further east you go the more acid the soils normally become and more deficient in nutrients like potassium. Our soils are high in potassium and tend to be more alkaline than acid. A plant that may do well in a hot and dry location in Indianapolis is liable to be burned to a crisp in a week in one of our hot dry locations.

The bottom line is that while there is a lot of information on the internet, far too much is inaccurate, or at least, not correct for Kansas or specifically our part of Kansas. Your Land Grant Universities, like Kansas State University, are constantly doing research into what does and doesn't work and what plants to grow or avoid. The Extension Office is your local portal to that information. We aren't trying to sell you anything. We're just trying to help you find the solution that is appropriate, and legal, so you only do it once, and you don't make a problem worse!