

Management and Environment Are Hard Issues to Overcome

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

As you can imagine, my job allows me to look at a lot of plant growth issues either from plants brought into my office or onsite in yards, gardens, fields or pastures. There are many things that will cause plants to not grow normally. Some of these issues are caused by insects or diseases, but many of the issues are not insect or disease based. Homeowners will bring me plants and the conversation usually starts with, "What's wrong with this and what can I spray on it to make it better?" And therein often lies the challenge.

There are so many things that can go wrong with plants that I am often amazed anything survives. We should probably differentiate, as well, between surviving, and thriving. Many plants can survive, meaning that they don't up and die, but they don't thrive. Some plants are broadly adapted. They can survive various soil conditions, sun or shade conditions, moisture extremes, even temperature extremes. I can think of many plants that we call weeds that could fit into this category!

But other plants are very specific on soil conditions that they need, or humidity or temperature or wind speed or sunlight. Blueberries are always popular and many people want to grow blueberries. Blueberries are very specific about weather and soil conditions. They want humidity, acidic soils, often cool weather, although there are southern blueberry cultivars as well. Unfortunately we don't have acid soils, we often don't have humidity and then there's the wind.

Homeowners who have dogs often contact me because the backyard, where they keep the dogs, is basically a dirt lot. They want to plant a grass that will hold up under the dog(s). Dogs, especially larger dogs, are hard on lawns. Dogs are active and the constant running around packs the soil and the toenails dig in to the soil for traction. If you have full sun then Bermudagrass may be the best choice. But you need to move the dogs off the lawn for a full season to get the Bermudagrass growing and well established. So what do you do with the dogs? But then we have a fair amount of shade in the backyard, which is good, but lawn grasses are plants of sunshine. Do you want shade or grass? It's a tough balancing act.

A few years ago we had a very dry fall followed by a colder than normal winter. Bermudagrass died out. Why? The soil was dry and dry soil allows cold to penetrate deeper so the Bermudagrass crowns did not survive. The crowns froze and dehydrated. Had the soil been moist, it wouldn't have happened.

The other problem that we often encounter, especially with diseases but also some insects, is that once you are aware of the problem, it's too late to do anything about it. Fungicides are preventative, like a vaccine, not curative like an antibiotic. Once a plant is infected there's not much you can do about it so you have to take steps prior to the infection period.

So where is this rambling story going? First of all, you have to know what the plants you are planting need. Just because you saw a plant growing someplace doesn't mean it is going to grow in your yard. Learn about the plant, learn about its needs, and understand that you may not have a place that is appropriate for it. Find out before hand what potential issues it may have. For most plants, I can help you know if it's a good choice as can a good nursery. A good first step is to see if a nursery carries the plant you want. If they don't, that's often a good sign that you shouldn't plant it. Finally, understand that sometimes you make a problem worse with trying to fix a problem when you don't even know what the problem is to begin with! Take the time to study and learn before you buy and plant!