

Old Gardener's Myths - Busted!

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Over the years I have collected, and responded to, a wealth of what I'll call "Old Gardener's Myths". Many of these you will have no doubt heard and some may be totally new to you. Like so many things with growing plants, one person tries something and it seems to work so they recommend it to everyone. Or, someone observes something with a plant, an animal or an insect and then notices the weather conditions and figures that one is a result of the other. Much of the cause and effect that people rely on can very well be cause and effect, they just have them reversed.

For example, I've had more than one person tell me in the fall that the squirrels have been very active collecting nuts and storing them (or burying them) so it is going to be a hard winter. Well, the activity is related to the weather, but it's the weather that has already been. Squirrels are a caching creature. They inherently gather food items in late summer and fall and cache them away for future use. The more nuts that there are, the busier that they will be. They will try to gather and store every one nut they can find. If there were a lot of nuts it's because the weather in the spring was good for not freezing the blooms and allowing the nuts to develop. That's all.

So let's move on to a couple of more timely myths for this spring starting with planting potatoes on a certain day or phase of the moon. I've seen dates of St. Patrick's Day and Good Friday as THE day to plant. The problem with gardening by the calendar is, that Mother Nature sort of ignores the calendar and does what she wants. You need to pay attention to weather conditions and plant potatoes ABOUT 3 weeks before the average last frost (average last frost is April 15th for Junction City). But that assumes that the ground isn't too muddy or too cold. Honestly most years the ground is still too cold on St. Patrick's Day. As for the dark of the moon, many studies have shown no validity to this. People talk about planting by one of these and they had outstanding crops. I'm sure they did. But did they plant a control group to compare it to for an alternate planting date? Probably not.

Tomatoes. I have had to dispel so many myths about tomatoes it could just make me cry! Epsom salts will not guarantee you outstanding tomatoes and it won't prevent blossom end rot. Neither will throwing an antacid tablet into the planting hole. Blossom end rot has nothing to do with calcium availability. Our soils are full of calcium. Blossom end rot is a physiological condition that occurs when the tomato is growing too fast. It's growing too fast because the gardener probably over-fertilized with nitrogen. Epsom Salt is magnesium sulfate. It is highly unlikely that our garden soils are deficient in either magnesium or sulfur. In fact, long term use of Epsom salts could result in excessive levels of magnesium which could cause problems. So just stop it!! Fertilize tomatoes lightly but regularly with something like calcium nitrate. It will cause less problems than other nitrogen forms.

In the end, many of these claims are not a measure of X, Y or Z, but an analysis of the skill of a particular gardener. Good gardeners will always have good gardens because they rely on basics of promoting good soil tilth, planned planting, moderate fertilization and some basic common sense. You don't need fads or fancy this and that. Just get back to basics, develop a plan and stick to it. There are no silver bullets or shortcuts for instant success. Hard work and remembering the basics are the key ingredients!