Gardening Tips for October 17 - 23, 2016

Those darn leaves

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. With the first scattered frosts hitting the area, fewer hours of daylight and colder weather promised, we are starting that annual struggle of what to do with tree leaves in the yard. I frequently tell people that the wind does blow in Kansas and if you wait long enough they'll just blow on down the street. But then a few days later the wind switches direction and the leaves come right back to you. The best way to deal with leaves is to shred them with your lawn mower, leave them on the yard and let them break down. They are a valuable source of nutrients and this is recycling at its finest! If you get a very deep layer or they get matted down with ice or snow, they can be an issue though and smother areas of grass. If you feel the urge to get them off the lawn, go ahead and bag them up with your mower and put them in the compost pile. This is also a handy way to take them directly to a garden or flower bed where you can work all of this great material into the soil. The great thing about using the mower is you get a nice combination of grass clippings and leaves. The moist high nitrogen grass leaves and dry high carbon leaves are a great combo for the compost pile. If you don't have a compost pile it's a great way to start one! While it is sometimes necessary to send them to the trash or put them in a pile or burn I really only want to do this as a last resort. The nutrients that grew those leaves came from the soil in your yard and the fertilizer that you probably applied to the grass, originally. Don't waste those valuable nutrients, recycle them as much as possible!

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Adding organic matter to garden soils

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. People are always looking for some magic secret to make the soil in their garden, yard or flower beds better. They often want something that they can spray on the soil. Or some pixie dust that they can incorporate into the soil and some of the things that people try ranks between scary and silly! It doesn't matter whether soil is too hard or too much clay or too much sand or whatever people think is wrong with their soil, there is one thing that they can add that will almost always make it better. That one thing is organic matter. Organic matter is literally anything that has come from a plant. It can be leaves or grass clippings. It can be composted manure or old rotten corn silage. It can be a crop of clover that you till under in the fall. Peat moss, cottonseed hulls all of these things are organic matter and will greatly benefit the soil if you add it and incorporate it. There are a few exceptions or things you want to use with caution. Sawdust can be added to soil but because of how quickly it is attacked by soil organisms you can actually cause a short term nitrogen deficiency because the soil organisms are using all available nitrogen to do their work. The other thing to avoid totally is sawdust, wood shavings or wood chips from walnut trees. Walnut has a compound called jugolone that occurs naturally in it that inhibits growth of certain plants, like tomatoes, or just flat out kills them. You never want to use walnut residue of any kind as a soil amendment. There are also some herbicides that can be carried forward in grass clippings - contact me for details on those! This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte.

What tree is that???

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. This is the time of year that tree leaves change color, usually, and then fall off the tree. And people ooooh and ahhhh over the beautiful colors and then want one just like it for their own yard. So they call me on the phone and want to know what the tree is that's at the corner of 1st and Chestnut. Now, while I know our area pretty well, I'm sorry, but I don't know every tree on every street. Don't try to describe it to me either. Saying that it has pretty red leaves can mean anything from smooth sumac to Virginia creeper to red maple to poison ivy. Seriously, people have seen poison ivy with pretty red leaves in a tree and assume that it's the tree's leaves. The next thing to realize is that some of the brightest colors are going to come from red maples and sugar maples. Neither tree is well suited to our climate this far west in Kansas and they will have challenges, so don't say I didn't warn you! None the less, it you want to know what a particular tree is, here's what you can do to help both of us. Bring me in a few leaves. Don't rip a branch off someone's tree, but carefully remove a few leaves or pick some up off the ground, after making sure that those leaves came from the tree. Or, bring me a photo on you phone or email or text them to me. Take a photo of the tree from a ways away so I can see the whole thing, and then a close up of a few leaves. Oh, and it helps if the photos are in focus. Blurry photos that look like a Rorschach psychological test aren't going to help. Then after I tell you what the tree is, please listen to my full explanation so you know what you're getting! This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420 KJCK, I'm

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Soil Testing Lawns and Gardens

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. I regularly harp on the need for more soil testing of lawns and gardens. The reasons are both many and few. But the logic is singular - spend money only on what you need so the plants thrive and environmental impact on down the road is minimized. Anything we put on our lawns, our gardens (and this includes fields, pastures, streets) will eventually wind up in some water somewhere. We all live downstream from somebody else and we want our water is clean is they want their's. Yards are fertilized for years on end without a test ever being done as to what nutrients are needed. We do it ourselves or we hire a lawn company to do it. We measure success merely by whether the grass is green and thick, or not. We are willing to pay the price, as long as we see what we want to see. In some states, like Florida, there was so much overuse of phosphorus, that it is almost impossible to buy fertilizer with phosphorus there now and many water resources have high levels of phosphorus in them. So, once every few years, we need to test the soil in our gardens and the soil in our yards. Don't think one will work for both, we need separate tests. Take soil from a half dozen areas down to about 3 to 4 inches, combine it into one big sample, mix it up good and then pull out one pint, or a one pound butter tub and bring it into the office. Tell us if it's an established lawn or a lawn you are about to plant. If it's from a vegetable garden, tell us what veggies you grow. We'll send it to K-State for analysis and when it comes back, I will give you a personalized recommendation! This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420 KJCK, I'm

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Does Sand help garden or yard soil?

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. Sort of keeping with the soil theme this morning, I want to try to destroy one of the all too common myths about soil amendments. Amendments are anything that you add to your soil to change it in anyway. Fertilizers could be called amendments, but we usually think of things like lime or sulfur to change the pH or organic matter to improve the soil tilth. Two things that I am regularly asked about, especially in dealing with clay soils, are gypsum and sand. Gypsum is essentially calcium sulfate. There are a few situations where gypsum can improve soil quality, but right honestly, we don't have those situations in Kansas, it basically has to do with high salt soils. So, don't waste your money using gypsum on clay soils. Now for sand. Sand can be added to clay soils to break up that dense clay hard soils. But to work, you have to add enough sand so that the sand grains are touching each other. If the sand grains aren't touching each other, the clay particles, which are much much smaller than the sand, simply fill in the pores and you've made a bad situation worse. You essentially taken a clay soil and turned it into concrete! How much sand do you need to add then to make a difference. Probably more than you want to buy and incorporate. Under most normal conditions we are talking about 80% sand. It would be like taking 9½ inches of every foot of soil out, putting sand back in it's place and then tilling the remaining soil in with all that sand. Not very effective. You're going to be better off adding organic matter every year and tilling it into the soil! This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte.