Taking Care of Spring-Planted Trees, Shrubs, and Evergreens

BY RICHARD HENTSCHEL

Trees, shrubs, and evergreens are planted with every expectation that those plants will grow to become an integral part of the landscape by homeowners. How well and how soon that happens starts with the plant's first several seasons in its new location in the landscape. A general rule of thumb for transplant recovery of a woody or evergreen tree is that it takes at least one year of recovery for every inch of trunk caliper. You will need to take care of that transplanted tree until it completely recovers and resumes a normal annual rate of growth. Shrubs take just one or two years to recover. The plant will spend much of the energy produced by the leaves to re-grow and establish a root system for those first years, enabling the plant to take care of itself in later years and rewarding the homeowner with shade, flowers, and a sense of satisfaction knowing “I planted that!”

Providing water when the plant needs it is very important. With a limited root system, watering is the most important thing you can do. In the spring when we are having cooler temperatures, the demand for water is reduced and there is usually adequate moisture in the soil from the spring rains. As the weather warms and soils begin to dry, you really need to check the plants about once a week for water and then only water when needed. With the roots not far from the root ball that first year, you should check for soil moisture immediately around the root ball. The surrounding soil may be moist, but there are no roots there to take advantage of available soil moisture.

Another area of transplant care is monitoring the foliage for feeding insects. The leaves of the plant produce food that helps the root system grow and recover this year, as well as the food necessary to create next year’s buds. Leaf-feeding insects are easy to spot: either you see them feeding, the leaves and needles have telltale holes; or worse, entire leaves and needles are gone. Sap-feeding insects like aphids and scale are less obvious. They remove the sap from leaves and twigs by siphoning liquid right out of the plant. Both kinds of feeding are damaging to a young plant that is recovering from transplant shock. If treatment is warranted, it can be as simple as a strong stream of water to remove the insects as in the case of aphids or the application of an organic or inorganic control product for chewing insects. Read the labels to be sure you are using the correct product for the pest and applying it at the correct rate.
Pineberries: Pineapple-flavored Strawberries

BY BRUCE J. BLACK

Strawberries (Fragaria species) are one of summer’s best treats. Depending on cultivar, June-bearing provide a large crop of larger strawberries and everbearing strawberries produce smaller berries throughout the growing season. There are also novelty types of strawberries that range in color (purple, yellow, white) or flavor. One unique novelty strawberry is the pineberry.

Introduced commercially to the United States in 2012, pineberries are hybrid, everbearing, white strawberries with red seeds, and they have a flavor and aroma of pineapple. Pineberries are not self-fertile, meaning they require a second cultivar to cross-pollinate. One pollinator strawberry is necessary for every four pineberries. Purchase pineberries in the spring as transplants, as they are hybrids and the seeds will not grow true to type.

Berries are smaller than strawberries, about an inch in diameter, depending on cultivar. Cultivars available in the United States are White Pine, White D, White Albino, White Carolina, Wonderful, and Natural Albino®. Pineberries are hardy in zones 5-8 and have management similar to other everbearing strawberries. It is recommended that everbearing plants are planted in a hill system. In the hill system, cut off runners as they appear, which allows all of the energy to remain in the mother plant. If allowed to produce runners, flowering and fruiting are halted and energy will not stay in the crown of the plant, compromising winter hardiness. Everbearing strawberries, including pineberries, have the ability to produce berries until frost.

When planting pineberries, start with a weed-free, well-drained site in full sun. Plant them one foot apart within the row and mulch with 4-6 inches of weed-free straw. Straw will have multiple benefits for your pineberries: it will suppress weed growth, retain moisture, and hold heat protecting the berries during the winter.

Pineberries can turn pink growing in sunlight, and slow down or stop producing during the intense heat of summer. Growers have reported that pineberries are a soft berry. Similar to strawberries, pineberries have disease and insect issues. Pineberries may have issues with leaf spot, leaf scorch, red stele, black root rot, anthracnose, gray mold, viruses, tarnished plant bugs, spider mites, aphids, leafrollers, slugs, nematodes, and strawberry weevils.

Contact your local Extension office for assistance with these or other plant-related issues. Many local offices have Master Gardener Help Desks throughout the summer growing season. For more information on growing berries, check out the University of Illinois’ Small Fruit Crops for the Backyard (http://extension.illinois.edu/fruit/index.cfm). Also, check out the University of Illinois Extension Horticulture YouTube Channel (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCEYBGqFXZS6Sn37n1mVcY1g/featured) for videos on growing berries and other horticulture topics.
The Basics of Straw Bale Gardening

BY NANCY KREITH

If you are gardening on a budget, have poor soil, or lack space you may want to consider straw bale gardening. This innovative method utilizes a bale of straw as a raised bed garden to grow just about any vegetable, flower or herb. Special consideration should be given to corn and sunflowers as those plants will become top heavy and cause the bale to tip over. Beyond that, choose any crop based on what you like to eat and plant them slightly closer than you would if growing in the ground. For example, one tomato plant per bale and three pepper plants were manageable in Illinois Extension bale gardens.

Selecting and positioning the bale is the next step. Use straw bales, not hay, because hay will result in weeds and grass sprouts. The bale can be placed on paved areas or lawn in full sun. When placing it on lawn, you can add a layer of cardboard or newspapers around the bale then cover the paper with mulch to limit maintenance of mowing around the bale(s). Position bale so that the twine is on the side and the cut side faces up. Next comes conditioning the bed, which requires soaking the bale thoroughly. Be sure to locate it where it will not have to be moved because it will be heavy once wet.

Conditioning the bale is an important step because it will speed up the decomposition process and allow for easy planting. Straw bales that have been sitting exposed outside for a year or more may not need conditioning. There are varying recipes for conditioning fresh cut bales and the process takes about 10 to 12 days. One suggested recipe is shared below.

**DAYS 1 TO 3:** Keep bale wet each day.

**DAYS 4 TO 6:** Each day, add ½ to 1 cup of nitrogen-rich fertilizer, such as urea (1/2 cup) or ammonium sulfate (1 cup), then add water. Organic gardeners can substitute 3 cups blood meal over synthetic fertilizers. Organic fertilizers may require more time to allow for decomposition.

**DAYS 7 TO 9:** Cut the amount of fertilizer in half and add water each day.

**DAY 10:** Stop adding fertilizer but keep it moist.

**DAY 11:** Feel the top of the bale and if it is less than your body temperature it is ready to plant.

Planting is simple. When using transplants make a hole in the bale and place the plant in the hole. It is surprisingly easy to spread the bale apart to make a hole. Adding a cup full of soil to the planting hole will help. If using seeds, place moistened paper towel on top of the bale, then space seeds accordingly and cover them lightly with compost or potting soil (as shown in photo). Keep seeds moist to increase germination rate.

Keep your plants vigorous and healthy by following proper after-planting care procedures. The straw will require a bit more fertilization versus growing in soil. As plants grow add a complete garden fertilizer one to two times per month and water in well. Bales tend to dry out quicker than soil, so water the bale well. Setting up a drip irrigation will limit your time spent on watering. Your time spent on weeding should be little to none. Learn more from Illinois Extension straw bale garden experts by visiting Fruits, Flowers, and Frass blog.
Tick populations have been increasing throughout the last several years. While they are most common in forested areas, or areas with tall grass, they can be found anywhere where there is vegetation. In Illinois there are three species that commonly feed on people: the American dog (or wood) tick; the blacklegged (or deer) tick; and the lone star tick. All three of these species are 3-host species, meaning that each life stage (larva, nymph, and adult) will feed on a different host.

The American dog (wood) tick is approximately 3/16 of an inch long and brown to reddish-brown with creamy markings on its body. The larvae and nymphs will typically feed on small animals like mice and birds while the adults will feed on larger mammals such as raccoons, dogs, and humans. In Illinois, adults are most active in April, May, and June, and by September are rarely seen. They are capable of transmitting Rocky Mountain spotted fever, tularemia, and ehrlichiosis.

Blacklegged (deer) tick larvae are about the size of a poppy seed; nymphs about the size of a pinhead; and adults are about 1/8 of an inch long. The adults are reddish in color with black legs. The larva of the deer tick will feed on mice, which is where they can pick up Lyme disease. The nymphs and adults will feed on humans (and other large mammals) and can transmit Lyme disease. In Illinois, the larvae and nymphs are active in the spring and early summer while adults may be active in both the spring and fall.

The lone star tick is also a small tick, with adults being about 1/8 of an inch long and brown in color. Females have a white spot on their backs, thus the name lone star. They will feed on a wide range of animals and all developmental stages will feed on humans. Lone star ticks are capable of transmitting Rocky Mountain spotted fever, tularemia, and ehrlichiosis. They are most active from April through the end of July.

Be on the Lookout for Ticks

BY KEN JOHNSON

There are several steps people can take to avoid tick bites:

• Avoid wooded and brushy areas with high grass and leaf litter.
• Walk in the center of trails to avoid brushing up against vegetation.
• Wear light-colored clothing (so it is easier to spot ticks) and tuck pants into socks.
• Apply a repellent containing DEET (20-30%) as directed.
• Permethrin can be applied to clothing (as directed) or clothing can be purchased that has already been treated and will kill ticks when they get on the clothing.
• Examine clothing, skin, and pets frequently for ticks when outdoors.
• If you find a tick attached, remove it promptly by grasping it firmly with tweezers as close to the skin as possible and pull it straight out.
  ° Clean hands and the wound site after removing the tick
  ° Do not burn or smother the tick
• See your doctor if any unexplained rash or illness accompanied by a fever develops.
Conserve Water This Summer
by Gemini BhalsoD

If you are concerned about conserving natural resources and enjoy gardening, consider adopting these water-saving techniques in your yard. Following these tips will leave your garden plants happy, your lawn healthy, and help the environment too!

Water your garden in the early mornings:
Watering in the mornings, before the heat of midday, helps plants get their fill of water before it is lost through evaporation from the soil surface. This includes your lawn! Water plants in the morning and close to the soil line to minimize wet foliage at night, which can encourage fungal diseases. Be sure to avoid setting your sprinkler up where water is wasted on concrete sidewalks.

Install a rain barrel:
Rainwater that runs off your roof and down the drain can be captured in a rain barrel. Remember, do not use this water for your edible garden, but for your lawn and ornamentals instead!

Choose native and drought-tolerant plants:
Native Illinois plants are adapted to long, hot summers. Their long root systems mean that after they are established they require less watering than other plants! Swap out some non-natives or convert a small area of lawn to include natives. You can be sure to find beautiful blooms that will fit into your garden design and minimize water use!

Group plants by water requirements:
Grouping plants by water, soil, and sun requirements will reduce overall maintenance in any ornamental garden. Tailoring your garden plan based on water needs will help reduce water waste.

Water your lawn or garden only when necessary:
It is natural to want a regular schedule for watering your lawn or garden, but sometimes it’s best to let your lawn go dormant. Decide at the beginning of the year if you will let your lawn go dormant when the weather is hot and dry rather than switching back and forth. You can tell if your lawn needs water when visible footprints are present after walking on it. Infrequent lawn watering also promotes root growth. The best way to tell if your plants need water is to get your hands in the soil! If you get into your vegetable or ornamental bed and the first several inches of soil is dry, it’s time to add some more water.

Add organic matter to your soil:
Adding organic matter to your garden beds or lawn improves long term soil texture and soil holding capacity; this means less watering! Apply leaf litter, mulch, or even brown grass clippings and allow it to break down overtime.

Cover garden beds with mulch:
Mulching around plants minimizes evaporation from soil surfaces and helps prevent weeds, which steal precious water and nutrients from the other plants in your garden. Natural mulches do double duty and break down over time, adding organic matter to your soil.
Gardening with Reptiles

BY RYAN PANKAU

Urban and developed landscapes can often be difficult places for reptile and amphibian populations to flourish although our cold-blooded friends do provide many desirable services such as pest control, increasing biodiversity, and providing opportunities for observation of wildlife near our homes.

The clean, crisp, and highly manicured landscapes that so many of us strive to maintain are often detrimental to amphibian and reptile populations. Removal of all leaves and plant debris takes away valuable places for shelter and foraging. Areas of unraked leaves or taller, standing dead plants can provide excellent refuge for prey. Throw in a few piles of sticks and larger branches and you’ll have a nice oasis for both predator and prey.

Small log piles with a variety of different sized woody debris can provide excellent foraging for many amphibians. The dead, decomposing wood attracts invertebrates, which are food to many amphibians and reptiles. With enough sun, log piles also provide excellent basking spots along with the nearby shelter of the pile’s interior for a quick escape.

Taller, unmowed vegetation creates excellent habitat and cuts back on some maintenance needs. Consider adding small pockets of native prairie plants that will not only attract reptiles and amphibians, but will also add pollinator habitat to your yard. A mosaic of vegetation heights provides excellent habitat for all wildlife. Some open, mowed areas are great for basking reptiles as well. The goal should be to provide a variety of “microhabitats” with varying features. With some planned neglect of small, out of the way portions of your yard, you can provide needed habitat for amphibians and reptiles with minimal effort.

A pond provides crucial refuge for amphibians as they require aquatic habitat to reproduce. However, many landscape ponds mimic the clean, manicured design of our yards. If you are designing or installing a pond, provide shallow areas with a fringe of plants as opposed to sharp, rock-lined edges. A variety of depths is great, so be sure to have a deeper area that will not freeze entirely along with gently sloping sides, which are more wildlife friendly than sharp drop offs.

Reptiles and amphibians are enigmatic members of the animal kingdom. They hop, slither, and slide across terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems worldwide filling vital roles in many food webs. As many global pressures such as habitat destruction, introduced pathogens, and climate change threaten their numbers, perhaps we can do a better job providing some habitat right in our own yards and gardens.