

Q&A Transcript

GardenAtoZ.org Webinar 57: *Getting the Garden Ready for Spring*, 4/17/21

It's that time of year when no gardener can keep up and all of us have questions. So we structured this webinar to go where participants' questions took us. We answered many (those answered during the webinar appear here in gray) but still had some left (in black) which we have answered here (in green).

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If you are interested in a topic expressed in a gray type question, go to the recording of the webinar. This chat transcript is in order as it occurred so the first questions here can be heard at the end of Chapter 1 and those nearer the end of this document can be heard at the end of Chapter 2 or in the separate Q&A chapter.

Michele: Do you think the white blooming trees out now are escaped pears or wild apple trees? (along road sides, not planted ones)

Ann: Did I just see a picture of a grub as was logging in? I found two when raking if that is what it was. What's the best thing to do about them? New 2 yr old lawn with irrigation?

Polly: Deer really put a dent in our arborvitae bushes - will they fill in?

Linda: During the coming freeze Tuesday and Wednesday are there any perennials up that should be covered?

Gretchen: This last week I've thought it was too wet to be in the garden – gardens are wet and lawn is soggy. Any comments about things being wet?

Judith: 1a: Is now the time to spring seed lawn? and 1b: A couple of weeks ago you recommended mixing in white clover with grass seed. is micro clover or mini clover equally advisable?

Jackie & Rich: How far back can I cut an elderberry bush? Mine is already leafing out, tall and gangly.

John & Connie: How can I keep my crabapple tree from fruiting?

Janet and Steven: There are spray-on products that simulate a plant hormone, auxin, that causes excess fruit to drop. Applied at the right time during flowering, to interrupt pollination, the auxin can prevent fruitset. Timing is important; if applied at the wrong time it can cause heavier fruitset. We have seen several companies' products over the years - right now we see only Florel on offer to home gardeners.

Pat: When can I safely plant my potted peony. It has several stems and a bud. I have been hardening off for about a week now on my covered porch.

Janet and Steven: If a plant in a pot is at about the same stage of growth as plants grown in the open, a few days of exposure to cold-not-freezing is enough. Plant it.

However, hardening off can only go so far.

Potted plants that are further up into their spring growth cycle than established plants of the same species can probably only be hardened to take light frost without damage, perhaps 28-30F. The advanced growth, even hardened, could still be killed back by temperatures below 28F.

If your new acquisition is a standard peony, not the early blooming fernleaf peony, and already has flower buds visible, then it started into growth sooner than those already growing in a garden. Probably the grower brought the pots into a cool, covered greenhouse at winter's end, or the peony was shipped to your garden center from an outdoor grower in a warmer region.

If your plant has precocious growth, it will need protection from freeze. It will survive, that's a given for a peony, but it may not be able to preserve that blooming tip without help. Go ahead and plant it out now, let it spread roots into your garden, but be prepared to put a box and a brick over it if a freeze is predicted.

We love buying bare-root peonies. Like other bare-root perennials, they can go out any time we can dig. No hardening required!

Laura: can you talk about how best to use horticultural vinegar...is it safe for the soil?

Janet and Steven: That's a really big question, because vinegar has been used in many ways on plants and on soil. (Note: It becomes "horticultural vinegar" when formulated with emulsifiers to facilitate penetration through the root zone in potted crops, or mixed with surfactants to help it stick to a leaf.) Take these two uses.

It can be a burn-down weedkiller, meaning it destroys the leaf surface and sets the weed back about the same as pulling the leaves off. As a weedkiller it can cause collateral damage if it splashed non-target plants.

Vinegar can also be used to temporarily acidify soil that is too alkaline for the desired crop. As an acidifier it can damage roots if used too heavily or in soil already quite acid. Without knowing what your soil pH is to start and what its cation exchange rate is (a rating related to proportion of clay and sand particles and how

many molecules of other substances will cling, how tightly) you cannot even begin to figure how much is enough or too much.

So use it carefully, after ruling out alternatives. Vinegar's burn-down weeding use seems most applicable to weeds in crevices, such as between paver bricks. Boiling water is as effective there. To acidify soil in a garden, pellets of soil sulfur are more practical.

Robin: my daughter has moles in her yard...any solution? Also, does that mean she has grubs?

Linda: How do you control the size of a bed of ground cover that wants to keep spreading.

Roberta: We have tiny moths in mid summer about the time the patches appear in the grass. Any idea what they are? They fly up when you mow. I thought this is what laid eggs.

Ipad: Our moles make hills not tunnels. Now what?

Janet and Steven: Are you near a lake, pond or marsh? Likely your moles are star-nosed moles, which forage not only in the soil but in water. They may raise prodigious mounds as they clear their tunnels, mostly once a year in late winter or early spring. They generally tunnel deeper than the eastern mole we talked about earlier, rarely raising ridges. That makes them tough to trap but fortunately it is not usually necessary because their tunnels are probably well below our walking- and digging level.

When we cross paths with them we simply spread the mounded soil around. We topdress the lawn or garden with it. It can be soil from so far down that it contains nutrients which leached down below plants' root zones. The moles' activity enriches surface soil, filling its a niche as a soil aeration- and renewal agent.

Mark: Had lots of voles last year that ate many perennials and annuals, is now the time to set out traps even though I don't see any holes yet?

Barbara: Have you mentioned jumping worms in the past? (invasive earthworms from Asia). They are very efficient eaters of leaves on the ground which are negatively affecting the woods. Do you suggest we kill them if found or just let them be? I understand the adults die in the winter but their eggs survive.

Nancy: please explain outline 2. b) deciduous and only-its-leaves-are-evergreen--can be razed

Linda: We have to replace our septic and drain field so part of our yard is going to be torn up and a lot of it will have had large trucks driving on it. what can we plant on the area that is not grass and how to repair the truck tracks.

Janet and Steven: To minimize compaction you can spread 8" of wood chips over the truck route. A deep mulch layer has proven to do more in this way than boards. Move plants likely to be broken by passing machinery. Put them on hold in cool

bright shade. No need to plant them while they are on hold, simply cover the root mass with mulch such as fall leaves.

After all is done, aeration is the key to returning the soil to good tilth - growability. The last drain field renovation we were involved in began with the new field covered in rock hard, packed, sandy loam. We worked with digging forks to pop up tire tracks – do not fill tracks with soil, which only creates a miniature swamp and poor growing in that space. Then we aerated immediately with a core aerator, sowed the new lawn and aerated again each spring and fall for two years. We scaled back on aeration once the space no longer felt like pavement to our feet and shovel.

We do not bring in "topsoil" as that's a recipe for introducing roots and seeds. Your soil is still there, it will just need air.

We are not sure what you are planning that you ask about a lawn alternative. If you are thinking to plant an alternative lawn over the septic field, what you plant instead depends on how the area will be used and what the growing conditions are. Foot traffic? Game playing? Viewing only? Is it sunny or shady? As we explained earlier, no plant endures walking like lawn grass and although there are many great groundcovers for various growing conditions, none look quite so uniform and low as lawngrass. Your intentions and preference in use and appearance are critical factors.

In dry sun we've planted buffalo grass as lawn, aiming for a no-mow meadow. However, that grass seed germinated very slowly over a year, a year during which the area had to be kept weeded.

In part shade we have planted ajuga to cover large areas. More on this coming up in Linda's question, below.

Judith: Tools question: What do you use to edge your gardens? What loppers do you recommend?

Linda: is there a ground cover instead of grass? This is a shady area.

Janet and Steven: There are lots of groundcovers for shade. Will there be much foot traffic there? No groundcover stands up to feet like lawn so if you will walk regularly in a space you wish to plant in groundcover, it is smart to establish some paths and install stepping stones to mark them.

Some we like are wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*), ajuga (*A. reptans* varieties), lilyturf (*Liriope muscarii*), sweet woodruff (*Galium odoratum*) and lamium (*L. maculatum*) as low groundcover for shade. We rarely plant a monoculture, which risks bare patches if conditions should turn against the single species, even temporarily. We plant a quilt of two or three species so they can have each others' backs, moving into any bare spaces. If height is not a problem, bigleaf forget-me-not (*Brunnera macrophylla*) and dwarf Solomon's seal (*Polygonatum humile*) are good paired as groundcover.

For more groundcover choices, go to Hortech.com and use the Plant Selector button there. Hortech is a wholesale grower of groundcovers and owner David MacKenzie wrote a stellar book on groundcover (*Perennial Groundcovers*). We think Hortech's Plant Selector will give you more options.

Barbara: I am having a problem with leaf spot on my mountain laurel. I pruned back the worst of it. What do you recommend? Should I do a hard pruning since their shape has been compromised by my efforts? Treatments? Soil additives?

Laura: black leaf spots on my black eyed Susan. should I just dig it all up and get rid of it? treat it with something? just put up with it?

Lizzie: This year all the leaves on the gardens became wet and compacted - it's still rainy, they are not drying. should I remove them (sadly)?

Joe: Mugwort, in the garden bed, is it a weed

Diane: About a month ago I cut an overgrown weigelia down to ground to rejuvenate it. I do not see any buds yet. Do you think I killed it. Did same with an old PJM rhodo. Not looking good.

Gretchen: I put leaves on my perennial beds and now my husband is wanting to tidy things up. When/if ever should I tidy it all?

Judith: What is best time to transplant vinca for ground cover? (I promise it's not invasive! I just wish it wouldn't keep dying out. Apropos dying back: The vinca that does that is in a semi-shaded area near a Norway maple. Time to find a more compatible ground cover? What would that be?

Janet and Steven: Myrtle (*Vinca minor*) can be transplanted any time. Best might be early spring and early fall since plenty of natural moisture usually follows that move.

It's likely that this myrtle is stressed by deep shade, drought (out-competed by the tree) and perhaps by the maple's chemical by-products. Norway maples, like black walnuts, sunflowers, quack grass and various other plants, exudes chemicals from its root tips, substances that discourage the growth of other plants. Pitting this tree's greedy, fast growing roots, its dense canopy and chemical warfare against myrtle... don't bet on the myrtle.

Once stressed the myrtle may waste away or fall prey to the fungal enemies. Don't keep replanting with myrtle unless you can change the growing conditions. Pruning the tree to let in more light and increasing irrigation may help.

As for what could grow there instead, with no change in environment, not much. The ground beneath a large Norway maple is almost always sparsely covered. It's a tough companion. Bigleaf aster (*A. macrophylla*) or the yellow-flowered epimedium (*E. x versicolor* 'Sulphureum') might stand a chance.

Read about Hortech.com Plant Selector, too, in our answer to Linda, above.

IPad: I have 2 lilac trees 6-10 feet tall that I'd like to move. Can I cut them back to a manageable size and then move them now?

Sue: when are you suppose to cut down the hydrangeas. NOW??

Jocelyn: Is there anything we shouldn't just cut way down? It seems like Janet and Steve are saying JUST CUT IT! to everything! ...lemony lace elderberry, barberry

Jane: tips for pruning honeysuckle vine on a trellis, please

Anne: My limelight is very old. Has 3 main stems. If I cut them to the ground it would leave about a 4 inch diameter section exposed. Do you still recommend cutting to the ground?

Janet and Steven: First, a disclaimer: We do not say that every panicle hydrangea should be cut to the ground every year. They CAN be cut that hard. Often, they NEED to be cut that hard but that's very often a result of gardener error in siting and care. We would rather see them given enough space that they can be pruned only every year or two to take out old wood at ground level, encouraging new growth.

Now to your old hydrangea. (Is it truly old, over 100? The potential is there.) If it needs rejuvenation because it has too much old wood or only old wood and is not growing well anymore, then now is a good time to prune for renewal. How far you cut – we'll get to that. If it needs to be kept small because it's in a place where it can't grow to full size, now is also a good time to prune.

Whether we prune it to leave a 12" stub or raze it, we are removing the buds it set last year so we force the plant to develop new buds from dormant meristems under the bark. The shrub can do this. There are meristems all the way down to the roots.

Whether we cut to the ground or cut only part way, or take old wood down to the ground and shorten other canes, depends on how much room we can give the plant and how vigorously it is growing in that site. We showed you examples of this during this webinar.

If you are concerned that this hydrangea is weak, not growing well and may be too far gone to make a comeback, you can rejuvenate in steps. Cut out two of the three trunks, wait until new canes develop from below those cuts, and then remove the remaining trunk. New growth will most often emanate from just below a cut. So if a trunk is weak we definitely want to cut it 'way down so the new growth it produces is not dependent on a still-old, still-weak base.

We hope this helps!

Diane: I have a large expanse of yellow threadleaf false Cyprus shrubs with a lot of dead area under the top of the branches. is ther any way of rejuvenating these shrubs or will they need to be replaced?

Mark: Does it normally take oakleaf hydrangea a few years to establish? This is the second year newly planted plants only have new growth from the base and all the taller growth from last year all is dead. I did dig them out last year, at Janet's advice, and untangle the circling roots and lower the soil over the flare.

Janet and Steven: Oakleaf hydrangeas are not fast growing but they grow better than what you describe. Canes should survive all but the very coldest winter. We usually see them remain at planting size for a year, develop additional new branches the second year, and we celebrate them as established when we see new canes, suckers, begin to appear after 4 years. Then, watch out because the species can hit 12' and a happy oakleaf will try for that.

Apply that 4 year timeline to your oakleaf hydrangeas. However, if you only freed them from girdling roots last year, you cannot count their previous time on site. This species is genetically programmed to increase by suckering. If those roots that should be free-ranging are wrapped around their own trunks, the plant simply cannot grow.

This year they should be able to put out some good roots and you can start counting. As big as they are now after you take out the dead wood, they will remain that size a year or more. Then there will be a year when you say “Ah, now they are growing some.” After that, look out. Once a woody plant begins to grow, with each leaf creating enough energy to replace itself, make one new leaf, and put a bit aside, its increase is not linear but geometric.

Jeanne: rose of Sharon, cut all the way down?

Judith: Can you top holly? And can you do it now? (Your guide recommends pruning holly in August.)

Stacy: If you have a damaged top on a blue spruce can you cut that off and start a new leader? Top had gotten girdled.

Diane: How do you cut back a mugo pine? It's round.

Nancy: monkshood browning?

Janet and Steven: Discolored new foliage now, or leaves and stems that die back during the summer are symptoms of the fungal- and bacterial problems the monkshoods (Aconitums) and delphiniums are susceptible to. The plants are especially susceptible when grown in hot, humid regions rather than the cool, mild climate they evolved in. Think Scottish Highlands, north Maine shore, or Lake Superior shore to picture the place these plants belong.

Take a look at our website at Key Words Unlock Problems <https://gardenatoz.org/whats-up/green-thumbs-up-and-down/eye-on-bare-limbs/key-words-unlock-problems/>

to see pictures of these symptoms. On that page, in the column “I see on the leaf” click the links to “rot” and “spots” to jump to those photos.

There is little you can do if this is the problem, except to start new plants from clean cuttings and grow them in a spot that has not recently hosted an infected monkshood or delphinium. Then monitor the plant and remove any discolored leaf or stem as soon as you see it. Fungicide applications as preventive may help the plant remain healthy longer. If you go this route, do not wait to see the problem. The fungicide is prophylactic, not remedial.

Bonnie: My purple dome asters were all black on the bottom. Can they come back ok, or should I pitch them?

Janet and Steven: Black last year? Probably the result of mildew and unless you thin that plant this year it is likely to happen again.

Asters are fast growing creatures. They benefit from frequent division. Dig yours out, slice it into sections like pie slices, throw out the center point of each piece to

discard that central, oldest part of the aster, most heavily riddled with disease (mildew) spores. Then replant the pieces, giving each as much room as the whole clump had before you dug it. Each piece will fill out but air will be better able to circulate around them so mildew will be less potent.

Michele: Do you think those edges you take out will be safe to throw in a compost bin if I cover it with the leaves currently in the bin?

Julie: have you had success dealing with Canadian thistle? let grow and cut back before setting seed? More for larger patches that would like to convert to garden...

Juli: Help. My neighbors English ivy is now in my bed. Going right through forsythia And weigela. I can't dig cuz of my back

Judith: Same advice about leaving leaves for shrubs where I've mounded leaves or pine needles for winter protection?

Janet: Are you saying to leave the leaves totally? Or just wait as long into spring as possible? Where I garden there are many maple trees that drop many leaves Thanks

Kristin: Frost predicted for this week. Too early to remove leaves from beds?

Rose: If I put seed for new perennials out in new beds - can I mulch over those areas or will I just smother the seeds? I don't see any seedlings

Colleen: If you smother weeds beneath a tree, do the newspaper and mulch endanger the tree roots?

Carol: plagued by a cress like weed in all beds, behind evergreens and shrubs, edges of lawn -- what to do???

MaryLou: hairy bittercress how to get rid of it, it took over my lawn and flower beds just in last 2 yrs....never had it before

Joy: Any suggestions on how to deal with a neighbor who's whole lawn is Egyptian garlic????

Jane: any help for wild onion/garlic?

iPad Nancy Simpson: I have a bad infestation of swallow out. How do I deal with it?

Janet and Steven: Swallow-wort (*Cynanchum louiseae*)? The vining invader from the milkweed family now making inroads in the middle of the continent? We have only tackled it once so far and think it falls into the bindweed category. That is, if you jump on an infestation when it's new you may be able to dig it, then follow up to kill remnants and thus successfully evict it. However, if the plant is already well established you may only be able to beat it back to a particular spot that you keep patrolling to nip out any new shoots.

Matt& Barb: How do I get rid of Bishop's weed?

Tina: Can I smother bishops weed in my landscaped beds using several layers of newspaper covered with mulch?

Donna: Star of Bethlehem

Jeanne: Star of Bethlehem has invaded my gardens. They're embedded in my hostas, which are just popping up. I'm digging out what I can with a small shovel but don't want to injure the hostas so am just pulling around them but not getting the bulbs. Wondering if I should dig up the hosts a to get the bulbs

J Novak: I have been told that SOCCRA compost has thistle in it. True or not?

Nancy: Preferred slow release organic fertilizer by name?

Janet and Steven: Garden-tone, Holly-tone, Plant-tone, Groganic

Joann: Can I use Milorganite fertilizer in my perennial garden?

Janet and Steven: As we explained during our Gardener's Health webinar, there is controversy about the levels of toxins in Milorganite and other fertilizers made from sewage sludge. They can contain traces of many worrisome chemicals. Some say the amounts are too small to matter but perhaps we will learn that what was once judged to be an acceptable, safe level is not safe after all.

We aren't qualified to sort this out but think we – mankind – must use that sludge somehow. We cannot just dump all that organic waste into landfills. Yet we should be careful. So we say to use it but restrict its use to ornamental beds and lawns, and to always wear gloves while spreading it.

We prefer to use the Espoma products and farm manure products that have not come from sewers that also carry highway run-off and every household chemical an unschooled person poured down a drain.

MaryLou: do you recommend Preen in perennial beds?

Janet and Steven: No. For many reasons, too many to recount here. Download What's Coming Up 91 and read page 4 for a summary.

<https://gardenatoz.org/media/14861/WhatsUp91a.pdf>

Diane: What is the best time to fertilize perennials and shrubs.

Janet and Steven: For plants, easy answer. It gets a bit more complicated when we consider type of fertilizer.

The best fertilizer timing for plants is so that the nutrients become available as the plants begin a growth cycle. For most plants, that happens in spring and fall. Roots extend themselves at great rate in spring, fueled from the moment in earliest spring when the scales that capped new shoots all winter first begin to open. Even that first sliver of light generates energy as it reaches the green beneath. They grow almost as much again in fall as leaves drop. During that time the plant is making new root and bud, partially by reclaiming the nutrients withdrawn from foliage, partially by drawing from the soil.

If you use a water soluble fertilizer, a powder that dissolves in water or standard granules, apply it as growth begins in either season. If you apply slow release

organic fertilizer, as we do, you apply it some time in fall and some time in spring. The soil animals digest and release fall's application by spring, spring's application by fall. All the while, it feeds the soil, too, and improves soil structure.

Julie: would hollytone be ok in beds that have herbs, flowers but mostly annual veggies?

Janet and Steven: Yes. Although only a soil test can tell you whether Holly tone or a different formula is *best*. The soil is what you are fertilizing, adding what it lacks. Once you supplement the soil it will be better for pretty much every plant whether herbs, flowers, veggies or other.

Michele: Can you throw the Holly-tone on top of the leaves that aren't going to "worked" or weeded?

Janet and Steven: Yes. Slow release organic products like Holly tone will be digested along with the leaves so long as you leave the leaves in place. It probably is digested sooner if it falls directly on the soil but sooner is not the goal with slow release products.

Lisa: I just planted a couple of witch hazel shrubs... what type of slow release fertilizer should I use?

Janet and Steven: It is not the plant that matters most in fertilizer type, it is the soil. If the soil is deficient in one of the main elements plants use (nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium are the Big Three) then the right fertilizer is one that provides more of that nutrient than the others. A soil test gives you a prescription, such as 3-4-5 fertilizer (meaning 3% nitrogen, 4% phosphorus, 5% potassium) or 4-2-6, etc. You are then able to shop for a fertilizer that most closely matches those proportions. Those three numbers are on all fertilizer labels, by law.

Once you know via soil test what your soil needs to support good plant growth, you might look into whether your plant has some unusual requirement, such as very acid soil. In that case you might add an acidifier or use a fertilizer that already includes it - it lists on its label "for acid plants." Witchhazel, like 99% of plants, has pretty standard needs.

Until you have a soil test to guide your choice of fertilizer formula, choose one with the three numbers in balance, such as 2-2-2 or 5-5-5.

Amy: I feel exhausted thinking about getting out and dealing with all this.

Janet and Steven: We are always exhausted in spring as we consider the challenge of keeping up with nature. But once we get out into the garden and begin working on step one on our list, we gain energy from the ground. There are various ancient religions that describe how energy is given up by the earth to the cosmos as plants grow, and energy returns to the earth as plants resume growth after winter or dormancy. We figure that lore simply captures what all we gardeners feel, since the very first gardener. That is, we are energized when we are out there in spring, we know we must be intercepting some kind of energy flow...