Home Horticulture - Ricky's Gardening Tips and Tricks – February 2021

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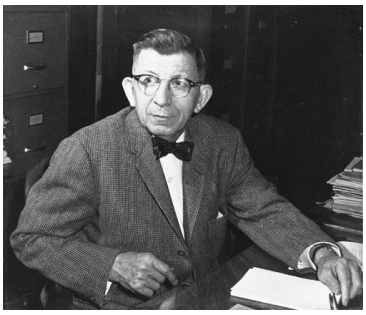
Ricky's Gardening Tips and Tricks / Home Horticulture is an online newsletter designed to provide citizens of Allen County and northeastern Indiana with up-to-date information about Horticulture and home issues, written in a lighthearted style! To subscribe, send an email to kemeryr7@frontier.com.

Soils – The Why – Not the How

Last month's Home Horticulture focused on the basics of "fixing" soils in both conventional gardens and raised beds – along with other vitally important issues such as LiMu emu trivia.

It is curious when one listens to experts talk about soils. In all the years I attended Purdue University for example, I never heard once about **why** fixing soils was important. I did hear that fixing soils was important to "improve" soils, but never any specifics. Same with other speakers I listened to or articles I read. Fixing soils was important to make plants grow better, but no one ever explained the specifics. It took many years of research to tell you this truth: Fixing soils to make them "healthier" results in healthier plants, which in turn make people healthier. Plants grown in healthy soil are more nutritious and more resistant to disease and insect pressure.

Early observational research by Sir Albert Howard and Robert McCarrison in India in the early1900's, and the Medical Testament written by 31 doctors in Britain in the 1930's provided validation to the idea that people who lived in regions where soils were healthier were in general healthier than people who lived in areas where soils were poorer. Here is a ton of references supporting their ideas. Medical Testament - The Nature of Health (journeytoforever.org)



Researchers at the University of Missouri began to look at the connection between soils and plant and people health beginning in the 1950's. Two professors, who both happened to be the head of the soils department at the University at different times, began to conduct research on the relationship between soil health, organic crop production, and nutrition. William Albrecht was an early proponent and wrote many articles regarding his opinions and research about healthy soils. Here is a review of his career plus a list of publications he authored on this subject. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Albrecht

John Ikerd is the now retired head of the soils department at the University of Missouri who carried on Albrecht's work. Ikerd is still in demand as a speaker for the cause of healthy soils. Here is an article by Ikerd on research by Albrecht. About halfway down is a summary of the benefits of growing organically. Healthy Soils, Healthy People: The Legacy of William Albrecht by John – BioLogix (myshopify.com)

The Rodale Institute has been around since the 1940;s, but in recent years has made research on organic production a priority. Their comparisons on organic farm production comparted with "conventional" farm production proved that organic production methods were just as cost effective and more sustainable. The following links provides a summary of research on organic gardening and soil and human health with references.. Research articles Archive - Rodale Institute Is Organic Really the Healthier Option? - Rodale Institute

There have always been mixed opinions about the benefits of healthy soils and organic gardening methods with some experts claiming there is no difference between healthy soils and organic food production and nutrition of plants. I respectfully disagree.

Planting Basics

This is part of my continuing series on the basics of gardening in a realistic fashion. Planting properly and at the right time is a critical component of success in this wild and crazy world of gardening.

When to Plant

In general, April is an optimum month to plant **perennials, shrubs, and trees**. September is the next option, but no later than October. Oh, you can plant during late spring and summer, but I can tell you from experience that most plants will struggle more when planted in higher temperatures and drought periods.

Cool season vegetables such as lettuce, cabbage, kale, leeks, chard, and spinach can be seeded in mid-to-late **March** in our area – depending on the weather.

Other "lukewarm" veggies such as carrots, broccoli, and cauliflower can be planted in early to mid-April – again weather permitting. Broccoli and cauliflower are best planted as transplants. April is a good time to seed **cool season annuals** such as poppy and cool season "meadow in a can" wildflower mixes. Pansy and chard transplants also are good to plant at this time.

Most annuals sold in garden centers should be planted after May 10-15, slightly after the "frost/freeze" date for the spring which is around May 10th. **The "frost" date** is the day where there is about a 50% chance of a frost or freeze on that day. The chances for a frost or freeze are less on each day following the frost date. This is why we have experienced a frost or freeze as late as May 18 in our area in past years.

Pumpkin, squash, and peppers can be planted from mid-May more towards Memorial Day as they really need warmer soil.

Most native prairie perennial transplants in my opinion, should be planted at this time as they need warm soil to flourish.

Zinnias and sunflowers can be direct seeded around mid-May.

Lawns can be seeded or renovated by overseeding from mid-March through May. Your chances for successful establishment of a lawn go steadily down after May.

Of course, planting properly and at the right time depends on common sense, which can be absent sometimes with over- enthusiastic gardeners. For instance, you might "want" to plant your tomato transplants purchased at the garden center in early May – to get an early head start on the season – or to earn early bragging rights with your neighbors or on social media with pictures and large cap descriptions, but reality can be sobering when you end back up at the center repurchasing the plants decimated by a freeze.

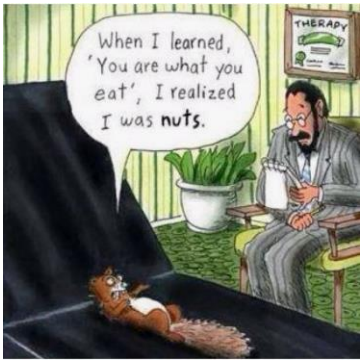
OMG Not My Grape Nuts! *Compiled from USA Today*

Grape-Nuts cereal is becoming harder to find amid the COVID-19 pandemic. For months, consumers have been searching for boxes of the more than 120-year-old cereal brand only to find empty shelves and out-of-stock notices. Some fans have turned to social media and Reddit to commiserate over their struggle to find the high-fiber cereal and question whether it was being discontinued.

The brand, which is owned by Post Holdings, confirmed the shortage to USA TODAY but said there were "absolutely no plans to discontinue Grape-Nuts cereal." "People may continue to see shortages and temporary out-of-stocks on Grape-Nuts as we continue to work through supply constraints and higher cereal demand amid the pandemic," Kristin DeRock, Grape-Nuts brand manager, said in a statement to USA TODAY.

DeRock said the cereal is made using a "proprietary" technology and a production process that isn't easily replicated, which has made it more difficult to shift production to meet demand during this time." Original Grape-Nuts actually do not contain grapes or nuts but is made from wheat and barley.

Ana Sandoval, of Sacramento, California, started to wonder if the cereal was being phased out after searching for a box since December. She said she has been eating the cereal nearly every day for the last six years to help with her Mediterranean anemia. "By eating Grape-Nuts, I can get most of my daily iron allotment without the nasty side effects of iron pills," "Unlike many people who consider Grape-Nuts to be another form of gravel, I like the crunch and the taste."



Laurel Zito eats the cereal herself on occasion but she mainly buys to feed a flock of doves near her Ukiah, California home. She said she finally was able to buy the cereal after searching for six months. "The doves do eat birdseed so it's okay with them but they really like these Grape-Nuts a lot and if I don't give it to them they actually sit outside my patio and look at me really sad," Zito said.

Eating Grape-Nuts on top of yogurt has become a routine for Josh Baron, of Boca Raton, Florida, and he was shocked when he couldn't find any in local stores in December. "How are you out of Grape-Nuts? It's like being out of flour or butter," Baron started posting about his search on Facebook using #savegrapenuts and his friends joined in, too, with friends in New York buying him eight boxes from a Brooklyn grocery store.

Baron recently scored five boxes himself after striking out on multiple trips and then took a selfie with the cashier to document the triumph. But Baron, who works in ticketing and co-wrote a book on scalping, has noticed the cereal selling for much more than the regular price online. On Walmart.com, a third-party seller listed a 4-pound box for $110 and there also are Amazon and eBay listings with hiked up prices. "

One wonders about the "proprietary" methods used to make Grape Nuts. Does it involve pulverizing gravel collected from country roads across America? Using bran from 20-year-old multi-grain bread left outside for birds and squirrels that they even they won't eat? Who knows?

Sign at a hardware store: *WE now carry Grape Nuts gravel for your garden pathways !*

Various signs held by sad pigeons at a Pigeon Protest*; WE ARE NOT SQUIRELLS – BUT WE WANT OUR NUTS! IF WE ARE DENIED OUR GRAPE NUTS – WE WILL POOP ON YOUR CARS!*

Blazing Star

Blazing stars are flowering native prairie perennials that are members of the sunflower family. The various blazing star species all share certain characteristics. They have narrow tapering leaves that shrink in size as you move upward. Tall stems jut upward from the base along which flower spikes open in a row from top to bottom. The flowers vary in color from pink to purple to white, and bloom in summer. Each flower head has only fluffy disk flowers (resembling "blazing stars") and no ray flowers. The feathery flower heads of liatris give rise to another common name of liatris “gayfeather”. Another old common name for this plant is colic root, alluding to its medicinal use.

Blazing star became very popular among European flower breeders and gardeners during the late 20th century. They were hybridized with other liatris species for maximum attractiveness and hardiness, then distributed around Europe and the United States to private gardeners. At the same time, several liatris species were found only in prairies in the U.S. Blazing star is commonly used as a cut-flower and also in perennial flower gardens.

Depending on the species, the clump-forming plant arises from a corm, rhizome, or elongated root crown. All the *Liatris* species I have worked with have corms – which are flattened structures used for storage. Gladiolus for example also have corms. The roots of L*iatris* which extend down from the corms often will penetrate deep in the soil, so transplanting liatris after they become established can be difficult. However additional “baby “ corms produced by the mother plant can be easily harvested and grown elsewhere.

The blazing star is a favorite target for bees and other pollinating insects. It had several medicinal uses among the native peoples of North America. The roots were ground and used as a pain reliever for headache, arthritis, and earaches by the Cheyenne. The Cheyenne also treated communicable diseases like measles, mumps, smallpox, and the average fever with blazing star root. The small, feathered seeds of the blazing star were slow cooked as a foodstuff by the Paiute tribe, and the Montana Indians used the leaves as a treatment for upset stomach and an antiseptic wash.

The most common species of *Liatris* found in garden centers is *Liatris spicata*, or blazing star. Even though *spicata* found in prairies is tall, culitvars were developed that are shorter. “Kobold” is the most common in garden centers because it is more “behaved”, and many gardeners prefer more dwarf varieties. A white-flowered cultivar is also available. I’ll be honest – cultivars of *spicata* are my least favorite blazing stars. The native L*iatris spicata* found at Hoosier prairie in northwest Indiana is spectacular.

I like the rarer blazing stars still found in wild prairies across the U.S. *Liatris aspera* can handle drier sites, and its flowers on the spikes occur in round tufted clumps. *Liatris pycnostacha* is a very tall, rare species with similar flower spikes.

Plant *Liatris* in full sun and well-drained soil. Liatris performs best when grown in full sun but it will tolerate some light shade. It tolerates poor soils, and some types will flop over if grown in too rich of a soil. Water regularly during the first growing season to establish a strong root system. Once established, *Liatris* is fairly drought tolerant. Good drainage and aeration will enable the plant to survive wet winters. Plants will rot if the soil is too moist. Fertilize before new growth begins in spring.

Liatris does not have any significant insect problems, but is subject to several diseases, including leaf spots and rusts. Powdery mildew can be common if plants are planted too close together.

Trouble in Robot Vacuum Land

IRobot Corp., maker of Roomba robotic vacuum cleaners, has filed a new patent-infringement complaint seeking to get rival JS Global Lifestyle Co.'s SharkNinja vacuums and hybrid vacuum-moppers cut out of the U.S. market.

In a complaint filed Thursday at the U.S. International Trade Commission in Washington, iRobot portrays itself as an American success story with a "passion for innovation" that's been undercut by SharkNinja incorporating those inventions into its Chinese-made knockoffs. IRobot wants the trade agency to ban imports of various SharkNinja products, including the ION, IQ and AI wet/dry VacMop.

SharkNinja said the complaint is iRobot's "latest attempt to try to dominate the robot cleaner market through litigation" and said it was "just as unsubstantiated as its first set of allegations."

"iRobot has engaged in a years-long pattern of using the courts to exclude fair competition, rather than competing on a level playing field in the market, and allowing consumers to choose high quality robot cleaners at consumer-friendly prices," SharkNinja said in a statement,

Sales of the Roomba and Braava have been exceeding expectations, driven by what iRobot Chief Executive Colin Angle has said were families housebound during the pandemic looking for shortcuts in keeping their homes clean. It helped drive a 59% jump in iRobot shares last year.

The case is In the Matter of Certain Robotic Cleaning Devices, 337-3530, U.S. International Trade Commission (Washington).

Roomba Update

I must sadly report that I returned my Rhoomba vacuum to Amazon. They refunded the money in a timely fashion. Even though I liked some features of the Rhoomba, it struggled to find its way around my small house, and had a few issues crossing my door thresholds.

I replaced the Rhoomba with a Roborock standard model that was about $100.00 cheaper than the Rhoomba when I used the coupon. The Roborock – affectionally named Rocky – has variable suction which is more powerful than the Rhoomba. It has a built-in camera and so it maps and finds its way around better. The Rock seems to have less issues with my door openings. Once programmed, it can be sent to individual rooms in the house - something the Rhoomba couldn't do - unless I spent a lot more. The only thing this Roborock model does not have is a base station that automatically empties. The Rock does have a larger dust bin- but it must be emptied manually (sigh).

Ants

Ants are social insects that live in colonies usually located in the soil near the house foundation, under concrete slabs, or in crawlspaces. In late winter, worker ants become active and begin to search for food for the queen and her young.

There are two things to consider when ants enter the home. Reckless spraying of pesticides does more potential harm than good. Colonies of ants are often difficult to find and completely control. Pavement ants usually are located either under your concrete slab or near the foundation of your home. Since foundations and slabs develop cracks over time, the ants have easy access to the kitchen or bathroom. Ants, like most insects, prefer areas higher in moisture. Even tiny leaks or sweating pipes can draw ants.

If hundreds of ants are seen each day, or the problem persists for longer periods than just a few weeks in late winter; then utilizing a pest professional is usually the best option. These licensed professionals can properly identify the species of ant you are dealing with, help determine where the nest is, and deal with the issue. Try to utilize a company that uses an Integrated Pest management (IPM) approach.

Many homeowners attempt to handle the problem themselves. One needs to follow the same IPM guidelines to help control ant populations.

Try to locate where the ant nest may be. Ants leave chemical trails for other ants to follow when they find food sources. It doesn't take long to observe what room in the house is the ant favorite. Sometimes one can even find a specific area where a crack or crevice is, or an area with a moisture issue.

Eliminating areas with moisture issues, and caulking cracks can also help reduce ant entry into the area.

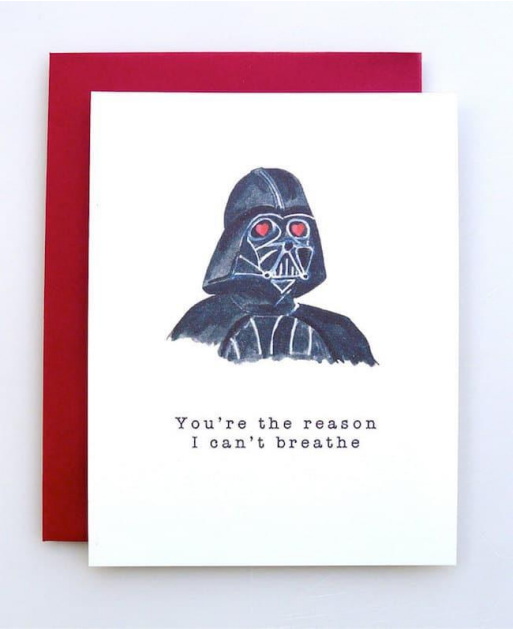
Bait traps are one of the best ways to control ants. They work because the ants feed on a bait attractant, and then carry the bait back to the nest. Boric acid is a common last-toxic bait, usually placed in sweet syrup or gel within the trap. It's a good idea to place the baits inside a container (like a disposable plastic container used for food storage) punched with holes large enough for ants to enter and exit. This helps prevent access to the baits by small children or pets. Some ants like carpenter ants are not attracted to traditional baits and some ants prefer greasy foods over sugar-based baits. I usually add a few drops of vegetable oil to baits to hedge my bets.

Orange Guard is a concentrated orange and lemon product that works well in kitchen areas as a contact spray. Don't use this product near cats or if you are allergic to citrus. Food grade Diatomaceous Earth sprinkled along baseboards or on colonies located near the home foundation can help control ants.

Since some ants can contaminate food sources, potentially spread disease, and damage foundations and structural wood - it is necessary to control them in certain situations. Make sure to read the label before applying any product.

Texas A&M Extension has a very nice publication to help identify ants. Proper identification can help determine what baits or controls are needed – and where the ants are usually found. You will need a magnifying glass or a dissecting scope to see the features. Thank goodness we don't have fire ants in northern Indiana.

Identifying household ants - Insects in the City (tamu.edu)



Cry Me a Cockroach

For just $5, the San Antonio Zoo will name a cockroach after your former significant other and feed it to a bird, reptile, or mammal. It was part of the zoo's "Cry Me a Cockroach" event on Valentine's Day.

And if your ex-boo was an especially snaky one, pay $20 more to have zookeepers feed a frozen rat to a reptile instead.

For those not into critters, the zoo offers a $5 herbivore option that consists of romaine lettuce, cabbage and other leafy greens that can be fed to vegetarian animals.

The best part of the deal? You don't have to be at the zoo to watch your ex-turned pest get eaten up. San Antonio Zoo plans to stream the feedings on Facebook Live.

You'll even receive a certificate to share on social media. If you're feeling brave enough, post it and tag that unlucky someone.

The money raised from the "Cry Me A Cockroach" event will go towards expanding the zoo's jaguar habitat with a connected overhead catwalk.

"Naughty" Brits Stealing Pampas Grass

Police and local councils in Great Britain have had to warn people not to steal pampas grass, after plants in private gardens and on seafronts have been decimated.

The Instagram-friendly plant has become one of the latest must-have home and garden accessories. The tag #pampasgrass has been used on Instagram more than 300,000 times. However, these fashionable ornamental grasses come with a price.

A single stem of pampas grass can cost upwards of £5 on retailers such as Etsy. While a whole bunch can cost around £40 for the fluffy stems.

Instead of forking out on those prices, many individuals have opted to pick their own from UK beaches. The problem has gotten so bad that South Tynseside Council has had to issue a statement asking visitors not to take the plant from the South Shields seafront.

The council wrote on Facebook: 'We have been made aware of residents picking plants and grasses including pampas grass from the seafront.

‘Can we please ask residents that while it may look pretty in their homes these plants are planted specifically to protect our coastline and are important to the overall ecosystem.’

In a more sinister turn of events, the plant is also being targeted by thieves in private gardens. Police in Sussex have been investigating a series of pampas grass thefts.

One homeowner in Horsham, West Sussex reported how thieves armed with secateurs had broken down her garden fence during the night to strip every stem of her massive pampas plant.

The now-popular plant fell out of favor in the 1970s, however, it is still very popular in many UK gardens.

If you are lucky enough to still have pampas grass in your garden, now is definitely the time to give it some love and care...and possibly insure it.

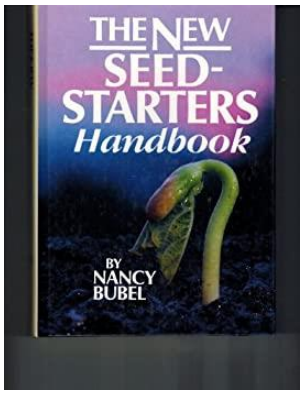
In northern Indiana, Pampas grass is not reliably hardy to survive cold winters. Honestly, there are native grasses that are better suited for our area, as most Asian ornamental grasses highly touted in the early 1990’s have turned out to be invasive.

Planting Techniques

Now that we have learned about improving soils and timing for planting, it is time to discuss planting techniques so plants will develop strong root systems so they will be healthy and vigorous.

Planting from Seed
In general, the smaller the seed the more difficult it is to establish. In addition, some seed needs special consideration to establish properly.

Parks Success with Seed is a good reference source for proper depths to sow seed of some flowers and vegetables, and whether they need light or darkness to germinate.



The Seed Starters Handbook is another great source. There are quite a few sources available nowadays, and I would encourage gardeners to purchase from used book sources to save money.

Although there are plenty of opinions on this, common gardening wisdom advises not to plant any seed deeper than twice its diameter. The classic "quarter-inch" planting depth found on many seed packets is too deep for many small seeds. For tiny seeds, place them on the surface of the soil and barely cover them with soil or vermiculite. Don't compress the soil atop the seeds as you plant them. The soil should be firm but not compacted.

Light or Dark
Many seeds, including most of the familiar vegetable and fruit seeds, require **covering with soil:**

Brassicas (broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower), Chard, Tomatoes, Spinach, Peas, Beans, Melons, and Peppers.

Some seeds need **light to germinate**. Simply place them on the surface of the soil and press them gently to ensure good contact with the soil. Do not cover them with soil. Most of these are tiny seeds, and a few of them are popular for vegetable gardens. Some examples include:

Dill, Lettuce, Ornamental peppers, Coleus, Petunias, Sweet alyssum, Ageratum, Cleome

Simply scatter **Meadow-in-a-can wildflowers** annual mixes in the spring on a weed-free seedbed and water occasionally to prevent the young seedlings from drying out. Prairie Wildflowers need to be scattered on weed free areas generally in the fall so the seeds receive the moist, cold period necessary for them to germinate, Even then it can take years for the plants to mature, and keeping weeds out of those plantings can be a chore.

If you want to establish prairie perennials in a rain garden, or smaller area in a garden setting, then **transplants** are the way to go. One can collect prairie wildflower seed in the late fall and scatter the seed on a tray (used to sell annuals) filled with professional grower's mix. Scatter the seed just on the soil surface and then use the palm of your hand to press the seed into the soil so there is good soil-to-seed contact. Cover the trays with chicken wire or hardware cloth to keep critters and birds from eating the seed.

Usually in late spring the seeds will germinate. They can be transplanted to larger containers and planted.

I prefer **bottomless or air pruning containers** for transplants, especially for deep rooted prairie plants, perennials, and shrubs and trees. I first saw this technique during a visit to Forest Keeling Nursery near St, Louis when I was a student at Purdue University. I adapted their technique for tree seedlings to prairie plants.

You can make just about any plastic container into a bottomless container , or purchase air-pruning containers online. Yoghurt containers or dixie cups work well for smaller plants. Half/gallon milk containers also work well. Thinner plastic containers leftover from purchasing perennials, or shrubs and trees work very well. Simply cut out the bottom of the containers using scissors or pruning shears – leaving a small ½ to ¾ inch lip around the bottom.

Use a paper or shop towel (the kind found in rest rooms) to place in the container bottom. I usually use 2 overlapping pieces of towels. Use professional growers' mix to fill the container, placing the plant so the root flare or crown of the plant is above the soil line.

After watering the plants, I position them-using boards or bricks- so the bottom of the containers are above the soil. Over time the roots will fill the container, and then air prune as the roots hit the bottom of the container. The result is a fibrous root system and no root circling common in traditional containers. The plants will establish better and more quickly. Unfortunately, some people just cut the entire bottom out of their containers and place the container on the ground. This defeats the entire purpose of bottomless containers to develop a non-circling fibrous root system for better transplanting. Eventually after transplanting bottomless container plants, the plants will develop their own natural deep root system.

Crickets Just Need a “Quiet Space.”

We humans tend to spread and frolic about wherever we please, a development that has been found to harm animals' environments and health. That may be the effect on crickets because of our constant noisemaking from traffic and other activities.

The mating behavior of crickets may be significantly affected by urban noise, according to a study published in the Journal Behavioral Ecology.

The reproduction of field crickets is important to the worlds of plants, humans, and animals. Because field crickets eat lots of plant materials rich in cellulose, their fecal matter is easily decomposed by bacteria and fungi.

"Their activity greatly accelerates the energy and nutrient flows in an ecosystem and provides plants with a much more abundant reservoir of highly available, essential growth factors," according to a Penn State New Kensington blog post.

Field crickets' diets also help to manage weed growth on both natural and human-made ecosystems. Additionally, crickets are essential food sources for some birds and other animals that have crucial roles in providing our food, timber, medicine, and recreation.

As mate choice is a powerful driving force for evolution through sexual selection, noise disruptions may cause a decline in population viability.

Male crickets have an innate playlist of songs from which to choose to attract potential mates: The calling song attracts the female, then the courtship, or mating, song induces the female to mate. A fighting chirp sends warnings to other male suitors. And what both sexes need for all these things to happen are highly sensitive organs on their forelegs, so that they can receive sound.

To assess the effects of environmental changes, the researchers paired female crickets with silenced male crickets in ambient noise conditions, artificial white noise settings and recorded traffic noise conditions.

The researchers allowed the males to court the females, and when the males tried to sing their mating tunes, the researchers played artificial courtship songs that ranged from low- to high-quality.

When induced to mate by a high-quality courtship song amid ambient noise, female crickets mounted the males sooner and more often. But when those crickets were subjected to white noise and traffic sounds conditions, the quality of the mating song didn't help the frequency and duration of females mating with males.

"Traffic noise and the crickets' courtship song do not share similar acoustic frequencies, so rather than masking the courtship song, we think the traffic noise serves as a distraction for the female cricket," said lead author Adam Bent, who led the study as part of his doctoral program at Anglia Ruskin University, in a news statement.

Mating songs are labor-intensive; they require male crickets to expend a lot of energy and therefore hold key details about the males' qualities, the study said — so human-made noise may have changed how the females perceived the males when deciding on a mate.

This blurring also could affect male crickets' health if they work to produce a more impressive mating song, and therefore those crickets' survival, too.

"At the same time, female crickets may choose to mate with a lower-quality male as they are unable to detect differences in mate quality due to the man-made noise," Bent added, "and this may lead to a reduction or complete loss of offspring viability

Definition of a "Low Quality" Male Cricket *(from a Good Housekeeping survey of single female crickets)*

1. Has been unemployed for 20 years.
2. Still Lives at home, even though he is 45 years old.
3. Keeps himself hydrated during the day with tequila shots with beer chasers.
4. Thinks "Put Another Log on the Fire" is the best country song ever written.

Wabbits

The eastern cottontail rabbit is the most common species of rabbit in our area. Rabbits have large incisor teeth which they can use to cause damage to flower and vegetable gardens, as well as trees and shrubs. A rabbit's teeth never stop growing! Instead, they're gradually worn down as the rabbit chews on grasses, wildflowers, and vegetables — meaning they never get too long.

Cottontail rabbits like brushy areas and landscaped backyards. As long as sufficient food and cover are available, rabbits can spend their entire lives within a few acres or even within the same backyard. Cottontail rabbits don't dig burrows. In the summer they use plant growth for cover. In the spring and fall when plant growth is sparse they will dig a small nest at the surface of the ground to decrease their visibility to predators.
A baby rabbit is called a kit, a female is called a doe and a male is called a buck. Rabbits are actually active all year.

Rabbits' eyes are on the sides of their head, meaning they can see almost all the way around them. This helps them to keep a close watch for predators while they're going about their business! Rabbits can turn their ears by 180 degrees, keeping a careful listen out for predators.

Rabbits perform an athletic leap, known as a **'binky',** when they're happy — performing twists and kicks in midair!

Like cats, happy rabbits purr when they're content and relaxed.

Rabbits are very effective baby-makers! Mother rabbits are pregnant for between 28-31 days, giving birth to up to 14 baby rabbits – called kittens – in a single litter. Cottontail rabbits can have up to six litters per year with each litter having up to 6 babies.

Cottontail rabbits have a broad plant-based diet which means they can cause damage in multiple areas and seasons. They will eat flowers as well as fruits and vegetables. Rabbits will also chew on woody plants and remove bark from trees and saplings to get to the nutritious cambium between the bark and the wood.

Angled teeth marks are often visible upon close inspection of damaged woody stems, and angled cuts are left when they eat the stems of flowers and vegetables.

Exclusion is the best way to prevent rabbits from causing damage to certain plants. To exclude rabbits, consider the following options or steps: Add a 3-foot-high wire fence that is secured to the ground or buried about 4 inches below ground level to protect flower beds, vegetables gardens, and berry patches. Chicken wire is effective but any wire that has holes 1 inch or smaller will work. The 1 inch spacing is important to exclude young during the summer.
As I have mentioned previously, tall, raised beds can deter rabbits, especially if they are covered with portable cages to protect plants.

Consider adding a cover of wire over the top of spring flowers such as tulips until they have grown large enough to be less attractive to rabbits. Rabbits love tulip flowers.

Wrap young trees with ¼ inch hardware cloth cage to protect them from. The cage can be secured so it at least 2 inches away from the tree so the rabbits can't reach through the wire.

Be sure the wire is tall enough to protect trees in the winter when rabbits will be on top of the snow.

Efforts to make your yard less appealing to rabbits can help reduce their impacts. Removing brush piles, reducing thick patches of grasses and flowers, or eliminating other features such as piles of stone that may provide cover for rabbits can deter them from spending time in your yard. Fencing off spaces under decks and buildings also removes these as shelter options for rabbits.

All rabbits! Run for your lives from this strange owl creature!

Methods that involve scaring rabbits away that include lifelike recreations of common rabbit predators such as owls and snakes, glass jars filled with water, and shiny spinning objects are ineffective. The Scarecrow – a motion sensor device that sprays water repeatably at invaders may work in smaller areas.

Commercially available or home-made taste repellents made from hot pepper and or garlic can be used on plants that are not meant for human consumption. Usually these make the plants taste or smell bad to the rabbits. However, these usually wear off especially when the area is watered or rained on so they must be re-applied regularly.

Planting Trees and Shrubs Properly

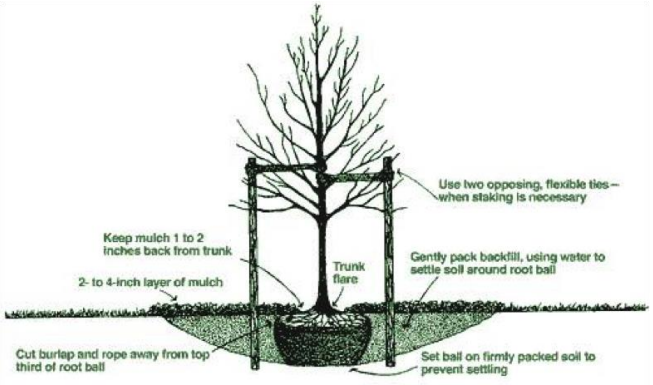
Experts have reported that over 65% of trees planted in home, city, or commercial landscapes are planted or maintained improperly. In Allen county, our heavy clay soils are not forgiving of improper planting and mulching techniques. According to Colorado State University, the average life of a tree in the landscape is only eight years due to poor design and planting techniques.

Regardless of whether a tree is balled or burlap, bareroot, or in a container; it is vital that the root flare be above grade (the soil line) after setting the tree in the planting hole. The root flare is where the trunk of the tree flares out before the roots begin.(See diagram below)

The other major issue with tree planting in our area is volcano mulching. This is when mulch is piled over the root flare and base of the tree – sometimes as much as 1-2 feet above the soil line. This practice is unacceptable for several reasons including: Rotting the trunk, formation of roots only in mulch, which makes the tree susceptible to drought, and damage by insects and critters who can hide in the mulch. Mulch should be no more than 3 inches in depth, and the mulch should be placed so that there is at least 6-12 inches away from where the trunk of the tree meets the ground.

Most burlap used to contain the roots and soil does not degrade quickly . After the tree is set in the planting hole, at least half of the top portion of burlap should be removed. This also is true of the wire cages surrounding the root ball. Remove as much as you can after planting—without having the actual root ball fall apart. Any string or wire that encircles the trunk or branches should also be removed. Leaving on any of this material will slow root spread and establishment of the tree. In many cases the burlap can wick moisture, causing the tree roots to dry out more quickly. Wires and string can also strangle the tree over time. I prefer protective cages made of 3/4-inch hardware cloth placed around the trunk up to a 3-4-foot height after planting.

Containerized Trees The major issue with containerized trees is encircling roots within the container. Often, by the time we purchase a containerized tree, the roots have completely filled the container and circle around the sides and bottom. Unless the roots are spread apart, the roots will never spread out into the soil. Often the roots will circle and strangle the tree or shrub over time. Use a knife or small shovel to cut vertical furrows in the roots, spreading out the roots as much as possible before planting. Remove any circling roots on the bottom. The key here is to tease apart the roots as much as possible without damaging the entire root system. Most of the info in this article comes from an extension publication I wrote called ACH- 226 Root Flares and Volcano Mulching. To the best of my knowledge this publication (along with all the ACH publications I wrote) was removed from the files and web site for Allen County after I was forced into early retirement. You can email me for the info, and I will send it to you.

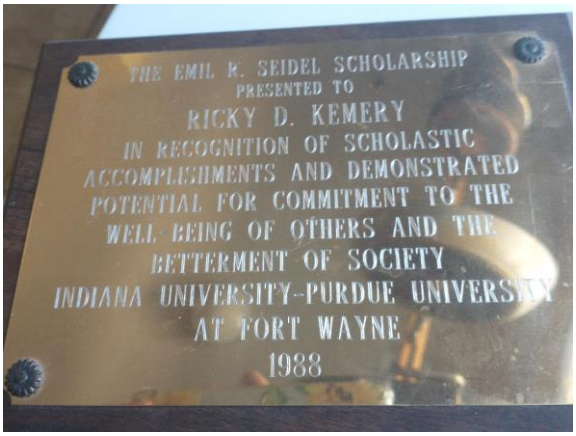


Here is a diagram of proper tree planting. Notice the hole is wide and is a half-moon shape. I only amend the backfill slightly if at all in heavy clay soil. Sometimes I just scatter compost on the bottom of the planting hole.

Pictures

Left: Yours truly at 4 years of age. Hula Hoops were a big deal when they came out in the late1950's. Later on, the Limbo and the "Twist" were popular – along with color TV. It seems as if things nostalgia - regardless of age - are very popular as folks long for pre-pandemic times.

Right: One of my favorite awards - and I am not a fan of awards – as most just collected dust on a shelf or closet. This one was special – because I dearly loved working with and teaching Master Gardeners.



The first scholarship I received when I was a student at what was then IPFW University. I was surprised because it had been a long time between high school and college, and I started out in remedial Math, Chemistry, and English.

The Gilbert Award was a high honor for seniors in the School of Horticulture. I also won an Outstanding Senior award, along with a prestigious Garden Club Scholarship. I always told my fellow classmates (many much younger than myself) that was not as smart as they were – but I would outwork them every time. This is why it was so tough to be questioned by Purdue administrators and a few co-workers about my work ethic and performance at the end of my Extension career. Those who knew and worked with me would know those accusations were simply not true.

Gypsum Not for Our Area

Many Garden experts and publications recommend gypsum to improve and "break up" clay soils. Gypsum is sold online and is offered at many local garden centers. The bottom line is that ii really doesn't work that well in our area – it works better in high clay high sodium soils out west. The other issue us that gypsum does nothing to improve drainage, lower soil pH, and improve nutrient-holding capacity like Canadian sphagnum peat moss – which I recommend. Let's leave gypsum in sheetrock instead of putting it in our gardens.

Community Garden Grants Available

Do you have an interest in starting a community garden in your neighborhood?

Abel's Offering, a program of Associated Churches, would like to offer the gardeners in your neighborhood an exciting new grant opportunity to start a community garden. The focus is to create spaces that stimulate social interactions, provide nutritious food options, encourage mental and physical well-being, and build on faith.

This is a matching grant of up to $2000. You bring in-kind resources of whatever you believe are assets and/or possible funds and we will match that offering with grant funds and technical support to expand or create your community garden.

The grant is open to any groups in Allen County who want to do something great to bring people together in their neighborhood through gardening. Applicants must apply as a group of stakeholders; individual applicants will not be accepted. The application letter is due March 26th, 2021. http://www.associatedchurches.org/

Ricky's Notes: I strongly support community garden efforts, and it is nice to have an organization offer real support. When I was Horticulture Extension Educator in Allen County, myself and Master Gardeners supported numerous – and I mean numerous – efforts by neighborhood associations, churches, schools, and others to help establish community gardens. A few efforts succeeded and still exist, but many have failed in the long run. It is work to establish community gardens and requires a few vital ingredients for success.

Community buy in for the long term – not just one or two individuals that think establishing a community garden might be nice. A Sustained effort and support by a central group is vital.
Water - You must have a water source. You cannot collect enough rainwater in barrels randomly placed out on the property to support a garden.
Security - The community garden must be safe and secure for all. Ample well-lit parking and access. Protection from critters may require fencing, and remote cameras may be needed to prevent against vandalism and theft.
Written standards and agreements - A leader or team is required to monitor activities and develop standards for the garden, such as Plot size, pesticide use, safety for children, water use, and what happens if someone doesn't maintain a plot properly.
Pandemic procedure –I think it is possible to have a community garden in a pandemic – but procedures must be established for mask wearing, social distancing, and sanitation, because as we now well know – not everyone wants to follow safety procedures to protect themselves and others.

Hoggles' Demented Cat Logic

To My Caregiver:
I have decided to end my natural inclination to attack any rabbit that might wander into the yard. Actually, I think cats and rabbits have a lot in common. We both purr when petted, and we both can have large litters of "kits" or "kittens". In representation of my new cat/rabbit alliance, I have enrolled in the Briar Rabbit "Learn how to Binky" online college certification. I will then serve as an instructor (for a modest fee) to teach other cats on the finer points of "binking". Also - Just to keep you in the loop _ your credit card will be billed for the $3,000 certification fee……

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