

Spring Gardening

By: Melinda Sperl

Spring is a time for all plants to bloom and the earth to regenerate itself. In our area, we have had an incredible amount of spring rain so we have really wet yet green plants. This early in the year we are already seeing signs of fungus: spots or yellowing on the leaves of plants, yellow circles on grass, or algae growing from sitting water. Take a minute to look at your irrigation system to ensure that your rain sensor is working correctly. If we have had rain recently, your controller should say "bypass" on the screen and not turn on. If you do not have a rain sensor, this inexpensive item will save you hundreds over the years on your water bill. When your irrigation system is running now, set it for only 2 days per week as we are still in the cool season. That is plenty of water for your plants to survive. When we get really hot in the summer you can turn it up, but only to 3 days per week. Never water your grass or plants every day.

All plants need some sort of fertilizer in spring. To green up the lawn use a higher nitrogen fertilizer. Look to see if the first number on the ratio is higher than the rest. For example, if the ratio were 15-3-5 you would know that it's a higher nitrogen fertilizer. Using a slow release fertilizer is recommended to avoid burning and will give you a longer lasting effect. Weed killers can come in many varieties (with the fertilizers, alone, etc.), but the most important part when buying weed killer is that you identify your weeds so you buy the correct killer. Nurseries are notorious for putting out winter weed killer in the summer at a "reduced" price for the unsuspecting buyer when winter weeds are well gone by the summer.

Avoid anything with Atrazine in it as it stays in the ground, gets in our ground water, and is different from topical weed killer as it attacks the roots of weeds. The problem is that it does not differentiate between weed roots and your tree roots or shrubs. Because it stays in the ground for years and does not dissipate, it can slowly seep down into the lower levels of soil where the stabilization roots of your trees are. And if applied over and over again, this can cause a large tree to just fall over in a storm.

Buying organic for our families at the store shouldn't stop there. It is important that we think about what is in our yards. You, your children, and your pets play in your yard, yet have you given a thought to the chemicals used to treat it? Using organic fertilizer is always recommended and using less or less invasive insecticide is recommended as well. Organic can be a slower way to treat your yard, but over time it is more effective. This year, all the rain caused the weeds to be abundant and since organic methods of weed control are slow, it was frustrating. But they do work. If you are diligent with pre-emergent herbicides, the weeds will be reduced.

Install many butterfly attractant plants. Milkweed is the host plant for monarch butterfly. Remember though when you plant this that the caterpillars will eat all of the leaves, so do not

plant it for the flowers, you will not have any. Hide it behind other plants and let the monarchs have it. Plant Bronze fennel and citrus for swallowtails and passion vine for Gulf Fritillary, as this is where they lay their eggs. Remember though to refrain from spraying these plants with insecticide as you will kill the caterpillars.

Happy Gardening!

Melinda Sperl is a Horticulturalist and the owner of Dream Landscape Design, Inc. You can reach Melinda at Melinda@dreamlandscapedesign.com or www.dreamlandscapedesign.com