

## Spring Yard Tuneup

By: Melinda Sperl

Spring is here, my favorite time of year! I love seeing all the flowers blooming, trees foliating and everything green again. A little less pollen would be great but we can't have everything.

Because we had a milder than usual winter we already have more insects than usual. I often get asked about the sooty mold on plants which is really a fungus caused by insect excretion and if you get rid of the insects the mold will be gone too.

After all these years I should have learned my lesson about when I give advice. I should write it down as even organic methods can go bad. For example, a good method to control insects on shrubs is to spray them with a mixture of soap and water with a bit of rubbing alcohol. Done wrong though this can be harmful as my customer found out when she put the entire bottle of alcohol in the mix and all the leaves fell off the plant. We are hoping that the plant will recover soon. The correct mixture is 1part liquid dish soap to 4 parts water + a drop of rubbing alcohol. Then spray it on your plants. The trick to this is to hit front and back sides of the leaves as you have to actually hit the insects for this to be effective. The soap also washes away the sooty mold on plants, which is unsightly but generally is harmless.

A more aggressive approach would be to use systemic insecticide, which can be sprayed on the plant or as a granular spread at the base of the plant. The plant will take the insecticide internally and when the insects feed on the plant they will die. Then the sooty mold will wash away with rain or irrigation naturally. Do not use systemic insecticide on any food plants like citrus trees or vegetables.

All plants need some sort of fertilizer in spring. For green up of the lawn use a higher nitrogen fertilizer. How you can tell is the first number on the bag the ratio should be higher than the rest, 15-3-5. Using a slow released fertilizer is recommended to avoid burning and will give you a longer lasting effect. Weed killers can come in many varieties, with the fertilizers or sold alone. 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 will stay 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 area and if applied repeatedly this can cause a large tree to just fall over in a storm.

In spring, you should trim roses down low. Knockout roses prefer to be trimmed low and bloom better the more they are trimmed. Other plants that bloom, like azaleas, trim after they bloom. Remember the 1/3<sup>rd</sup> rule when trimming. Trim 1/3<sup>rd</sup> now, let the plant recover, then if you need to trim more, trim another 1/3<sup>rd</sup> and you reduce the stress on the plant.

Control weeds for the future by applying a pre-emergent herbicide that will prevent the weed seeds from germinating from last season.

Happy Gardening!

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