

GARDENING TIPS FOR JULY

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We are now into the middle of summer. Even though it is nice to take a break during these months, our gardens never seem to miss a beat. The Virginia Cooperative Extension website (www.ext.vt.edu) provides publications that give information for many aspects of gardening. It also lists monthly tips for gardeners to consider. Here are some that I consider important:

As temperatures increase, mowing heights should also increase to 2 ½ - 3 inches for bluegrass and fescue combinations. Never remove more than 1/3 of the grass blade which causes stress to the plant. If the grass is cut too short, root growth is slowed and turf is less tolerant of heat and drought. Weeds are more likely to invade the lawn.

It is important to keep mower blades sharp. A dull blade will rip and shred grass which will weaken the plant and promote disease.

Deep and infrequent watering (1 inch of rainfall/irrigation per week) helps to maintain healthy roots and reduces weeds from germinating.

If you don't already recycle your grass clippings when you mow, please consider doing it now. The EPA estimates that yard waste accounts for up to 50% of what is dumped in landfills during the growing season. Even when clippings are taken by municipalities to composting sites, it is expensive and not without problems. Equally important is that clippings that are mulched back onto the yard provide desirable organic matter and nutrients. Research shows lawns will show significant improvements when mulching is done for a year. It is not a replacement for the annual fall application of fertilizer.

Add additional mulch where it is needed in planting beds to retain moisture and keep weeds down. Organic materials tend to decompose more rapidly in hot, humid weather.

Roses that are cut from your garden late in the day tend to last longer. This is a different practice than other cut flowers.

Typical hot dry weather is ideal for spider mites on evergreens such as spruces. If you suspect you may have an infestation (dead spots), hold a white sheet of paper under a branch and give it a gentle tap. If mites are present, they will drop onto the paper and you'll see them crawling around. A small infestation can be treated with a forceful spray of water from your hose. More severe infestations should be treated with a pesticide specifically recommended for mites.

Check your containers daily for moisture. In hot, dry weather, these containers need to be watered at least once daily if not more frequently.

Do not fertilize turf, trees, and shrubs during hot, dry weather. When plants are stressed, it is more harmful to encourage plant growth.

Spring flowering shrubs should be pruned immediately following their show. Pruning later during the summer will remove flower buds for the following season.

Flowering dogwoods are sensitive to drought stress. Keep them healthy by maintaining a large ring of mulch 3" thick around but not touching the trunk (remember – NO volcanoes!). Water them thoroughly during dry periods.

A big July headache is the attack of Japanese beetles. Beetle traps are really not very effective for the typical homeowner because they tend to attract more beetles into the yard. If you feel it is necessary to use traps, place them at least 25 feet from plants that tend to be susceptible. They are especially fond of

deteriorating flower blossoms. You can prevent the beetles somewhat by removing blossoms and by knocking the beetles into jars of soapy water to prevent them from flying away.

Many people tend to forget to remove tree stakes that were used when planting was done. Staking is typically used only when planting is done on steep slopes or when weather conditions will be severe. Stakes and any wires should usually be removed after one year. This is ample time for roots to become established. When wires are not removed they girdle the tree and cause many health problems over the life of the tree

For free advice on your gardening problems, contact Fairfax County Master Gardeners:

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