

How does your garden grow?

When spring lures Michigan gardeners into donning the gardening gloves, they tend to come up with questions about lawn and garden matters. Michigan State University (MSU) Extension specialists lend some advice for winning the garden problem fight. Be ready to answer the bell when good weather arrives in April.

Does it hurt spring flowering bulbs to cut the flowers off?

No. Removing the flowers strengthens the bulbs because it saves them from spending any energy on developing seed. All the food the plant produces can go into storage in the bulb for next year's growth.

What's an easy way to give edible potted peas something to climb on? I've tried string strung between stakes, but the string breaks after the vines get long and heavy.

Stick 'em up — with twigs and small branches from trees and shrubs. The vines will twine their tendrils around them. Stick 'em up soon after seeds germinate and seedlings emerge from the soil. Another way to solve the problem is to avoid it by growing shorter varieties such as Sugar Rae.

Should I give my sweet peas something to climb on?

It depends on the variety. Some varieties form neat mounds 12 to 20 inches high without support. Others reach six feet or more in length and need a trellis, fence or other support to climb on.

For the past couple of years, the sycamore tree in my back yard has lost most of its leaves in the spring. First we notice the edges of the leaves turning brown. Then the leaves and even twigs and small branches fall off. In the summer, the tree

puts out a new crop of leaves. What's the problem? Is it likely to happen again this year? What can we do about it?

It sounds as if your sycamore is infected with anthracnose, a fungus disease. Other species that may be attacked include maple, oak and ash. The disease-causing fungus overwinters in small cankers on the tree. Cool, wet spring weather favors rapid spread of the disease. Cleaning up fallen leaves and twigs and burning them helps control the problem. Spring and fall fertilizing and watering during dry weather will help trees recover from repeated defoliations.

Chemical controls are not recommended for treatment of anthracnose. Though chemicals are available, to be effective they must be applied three times each year and coverage must be excellent. This usually means hiring a professional tree service. This can be a very expensive way to treat a disease that occurs only during cool, wet springs and affects only the tree's appearance. It is much easier and cheaper to live with anthracnose and give the tree extra water and fertilizer to make up for the energy the tree expends putting out a second set of leaves than to go to the trouble and expense of keeping the tree blemish-free.

The big old box elder by my garage was damaged in a windstorm this spring. What do I need to take into consideration as I'm trying to decide whether to try to save it or take it out?

The first consideration is the species. Box elders are quick-growing, weak structured trees that tend to be very susceptible to wind and ice damage, so this latest incident is probably not the first or last time the tree has been or will be damaged.

Another factor is the severity of the dam-

age. If a large part of the crown has been broken out or the trunk has split, it will probably take extensive repairs to salvage what's left. Because the tree is one of the less desirable species, it may not be worth what it would cost to repair it. Consider, too, the general condition of the tree. If it's hollow or a major portion of it is rotten, it may be dangerous to leave it standing, especially so near your garage, where the tree could do some expensive damage if it falls.

Why do forsythia bushes sometimes have flowers only on their lower parts?

Forsythia flower buds are killed by temperatures around -15 degrees F. A deep blanket of snow around the base of the plant insulates the flower buds near the ground and prevent their being killed.

What's this I hear about using aluminum foil for garden mulch?

Some gardeners use heavy-duty aluminum foil as mulch under cantaloupe, squash and cucumber plants to repel aphids. Apparently the light reflecting from the foil obscures the visual cues that the aphid uses to choose a landing site. Whether it would work for cucumber beetles is uncertain. They may use other cues, such as smell, and/or not be as choosy as aphids. Also, they don't migrate long distances — just from border to field or garden and back. The foil should work best on small plants (less foliage means more reflection) but will probably keep the soil from being warmed by the sun. This can be a disadvantage in Michigan with its already short growing season. If you want to try foil mulch, be sure to stick the edges into the soil so the foil doesn't blow away. You can then insert seeds or plants through slits in the foil into

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