Gardening Question and Answer Column

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Q. It is time to prune roses but my plants do not have any foliage. Do we still prune them?

A. Unless they are dead they will be sprouting foliage any time now. Prune them to leave 3 or 4 stems emerging above the graft at as close to 60degree angle as possible. Visit plantanswers.com for diagrams and more instructions. It is also time to apply a half cup of slow release lawn fertilizer, begin a regular irrigation program (once/week works), and begin a weekly spray program. For insects consider acephate and for fungus use triforine . Organic gardeners can try spinosad, neem oil, and sulfur.

Q.I have been very interested in your discussions here in the paper and on the radio (Milberger’s Gardening South Texas) about attracting the birds with plants, seeds and suet. We use suet blocks and feed sunflower seed. This has been the year for lots of birds including different species. There are 8 varieties of small birds. I can recognize the chickadees, the titmice, the wrens, the house finches and the lesser goldfinches. Based on your discussions I believe the remaining species would be the orange-crowned warbler, the ruby-crowned kinglet and the American goldfinches. Help me distinguish between those 3 species.

A. Describing the difference between 3 small bird species is just as hard as describing how to prune a rose or fruit tree. Of the 3 species, the American goldfinches are the largest and most distinctive. They usually travel in flocks of 5-15 and have white wing bars with some black on the wings. They are chunky birds. The orange crowned warbler is thin, army green colored bird with no distinctive wing bars. I have only seen the orange crown one time in my many years of observing them. They travel singly or in pairs. You see the ruby crown on kinglets occasionally but it is also unusual. They are chunky like American goldfinches but smaller. The wing bars are less distinct. The kinglets have a noticeable partial eye-ring. Their beak also emerges from their face like a common pin. Hope that information is useful.

Q. We planted cereal rye to reduce our nematode population. It is now 5 inches tall. Can we till it into the soil to get ready for the new tomato planting? Should we expect fewer nematodes?

A. It would be more effective for reducing the nematode population if you waited another month before tilling in the rye. Hopefully the tops and roots will triple in size in that period. The roots trap a portion of the nematode population. Next year plant the cereal rye earlier (October) so it will grow larger before it is turned over. The larger the root system, the more nematodes that are trapped. It is too cold to plant tomatoes until after March 15 anyway.

Q. Our English peas have just started to bloom. Will they produce some peas before it gets too hot?

A. Yes, the plants are on schedule to produce peas in March, April and May.

Q. We realize live oaks drop their leaves in the spring but should worry if our tree is dropping the leaves now? The leaves are discolored with black spots. The scariest thing is that our neighbor’s trees are not dropping any leaves yet. Should we be worried?

A. No, all live oaks are different. We are well in the expected leaf drop period. The discolored leaves with black spots are also common. Use the leaves for mulch or as raw material for the compost pile. It also works to mow them where they lie on the lawn where they will quickly decompose and provide organic material for the lawn grass.