Gardening Question and Answer

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Q. With the lack of rain this month the soil in my yard has huge cracks. In all the droughts we have experienced, I have never noticed that before. Is it unusual? Will it cause long term problems?

A. The cracking is normal for many types of heavier soil in dry spells. They contract as the moisture evaporates. In some situations it can contribute to foundation cracking. That issue is dealt with by stringing a soaker hose on the soil close to the house foundation and applying water every week. The cracks in the landscape quickly expand and close when we get a significant rain. They are part of the problem of dry soil but not a special problem for plants.

Q. We have a large number of pretty orange butterflies on our milkweed and mistflowers that look somewhat like Monarchs but not exactly. Any idea what they are?

A. Since it has warmed up this summer the Gulf Fritillary butterflies have moved into area landscapes. They fit your description. Gulf Fritillaries obtain nectar from milkweed, mistflower and other plants but lay their eggs on passion vine. At times the caterpillars are so thick, they completely strip the passion vine of foliage. The vines often keep blooming and quickly re-foliate.

Q. I went to the nursery the other day to pick up transplants for a fall tomato planting. The nurseryman convinced me to buy some leggy Surefire tomatoes. He said I could plant the tomatoes deep up to the first leaves, and in fact he said, “all tomato transplants should be planted deep”! He said it adds drought capability. Do you agree?

A. It is true tomatoes can be planted deep, roots will develop on the stems. It is the normal tactic to use with leggy plants. I don’t know of any evidence however that such a technique provides superior drought tolerance or production. Leggy transplants are at the mercy of winds and often are the result of excessive shade during their development. The leggy shaded transplants have a better chance of surviving the blast of sun that they are subjected to when they are planted in full sun, if they planted deep or laid down in the soil.

Q. Small pecans are falling from our trees. Is it due to the high temperatures and lack of rain? Will we lose them all? Will it help if we water?

A. Every year some pecans drop from trees due to wind and pests but it is more prevalent during a dry summer after a wet spring. Lots of pecans formed because moisture was plentiful and now it is hard for the trees to support them. Mature pecan trees with nuts can use 2 inches of water every week so it will be tough to provide enough water with your hose. Most of us have to be content with the pecans that the trees can fill out and mature with the rain that occurs.

Q. We thought the yellow areas in our lawn were being caused by drying out but extra hand watering didn’t help. Is there anything else that could by causing the problem?

A. If the yellowing areas are in the hottest part of the lawn and extra water does not help, it could be caused by chinch bugs. They are sucking insects that you should be able to see if you look real close. They are controlled by a soil insecticide. Apply it now. Follow label instructions.