Gardening Question and Answer

Distribute 10-17-2016

Q. In addition to cabbage loopers my fall vegetable garden has at least one other type of caterpillar feeding on the greens. It is a chunky grayish caterpillar that seems to spend the day on the soil and feeds on the plants at night. Will the Bt products you describe control them as well?

A. I believe you are describing cutworms. They are dark and emerge from the soil to eat the stems of seedlings. They can be quite thick in a garden and destroy a large number of seedlings such as radish, corn, spinach, turnips, tomatoes, lettuce and beets. The Bt provides some control if the worms are actually feeding on the foliage but most of the damage they do is to consume stems at or below soil level which means the impact of Bt may be limited. Control cutworms with a Sevin spray or dusting of the soil along the newly seeded row.

To make your Bt treatment on broccoli, cabbage, spinach and other foliage include 2 teaspoons of detergent in each gallon of Bt spray. The detergent acts as a spreader to get better coverage on the foliage. Also be careful to spray under the leaves. Set the nozzle at a fine spray and the mist will do a good job of covering the bottom surface if you aim the nozzle under the plant.

Q. We have swept up the acorns on our sidewalks and the driveway. What should we do with them? Is there any way to reduce the acorn crop? They are so messy and as far as I can tell they are not useful. They get stuck in the dog’s paws!

A. As far as I know there is no way to reduce the crop. Acorns are high value wildlife food. Pile your collected acorns where the birds, squirrels and deer can find them. Most years and in most neighborhoods, the acorns have been collected or consumed by wildlife within 4 or 5 weeks after they fall from the tree.

Q. Tell us about cyclamen. We have found a nursery we like and they feature the plants. They are beautiful but expensive. Is it true that they can survive the winter cold and will retain their bloom until May?

A. Cyclamens are my favorite plants to provide winter color in the shade. They do pretty well with cold, partly because they are usually planted in sheltered locations. If the forecast is for the temperatures to fall below 26 degrees, cover them with a sheet or agricultural fiber. The plants won’t freeze but the blooms will be knocked off by the cold. It takes them a long time to reset the bloom. They are great in containers or shaded beds. They are not xeriscape plants but can prosper with watering twice/week. Protect cyclamen, primula, pansies and other low-growing flowers from slugs and snails with slug and snail bait. If the weather warms up in April they may begin to decline at that time.

Q. The stink bugs have found our tomatoes. We have tried to use a soapy solution but it is not working. Is there any organic control that will prevent them from scarring the fruit?

A. Stink bugs are difficult to control. I have found Sevin (carbaryl) is the most effective insecticide to use to control them. You may want to check the labels of fruit tree sprays at your favorite nursery. They may have a spray with pyrethrum or another organic chemical as the active ingredient that may provide some control. Follow label instructions whether you use a manufactured or organic insecticide.

Q. We have some slow release lawn fertilizer leftover from spring. The bag is open and we Want to use it up. Can we apply it now to the lawn?

A. Yes, apply it to the lawn or use it in the vegetable and flower gardens this winter.