

Gardening Q&A

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Q. Is it too late to aerate and top dress our lawn? For a number of years, we aerated, and top dressed every year, but our lives got busy with jobs and grandchildren. We have neglected to do it for several years and I think the grass needs it. The soil seems compacted. We used to do it in February.

A. The normal time to aerate and top dress for residential lawns is in February but golf courses and other intensely managed lawns aerate all through the year. It should work fine. Only use one half inch of top dressing. I think pure compost works better than top dressing, which is diluted with sand.

Q. My neighbor has beautiful iris. He says if I help him thin them out next fall I can have as many as I want. Is the fall the time to thin them and will it work to remove them from his garden directly to mine? How should I prepare the soil?

A. Iris have been beautiful this year and we can expect at least another month of blooms from some varieties. Iris are not fussy about soil. Plant them in full sun in a soil that is well drained or at least not soggy. They even prosper in dry compacted soil if you add a layer of garden soil. Plant the rhizomes so that the top is even with the soil level. Do not use mulch. An iris bed can even be planted in areas where the deer can reach them. In most situations the deer do not eat iris.

Q. In one of your columns huisache trees were identified as a "good to grow species". For me they are a "good to go" species with their thorns and seeding all over the yard! Do you have any guidance to offer on controlling them?

A. It all depends on your perspective. I have removed some huisache from my landscape but value some for their value as wildlife cover and a source of nectar for bees. They are attractive in full bloom and have a pleasant rounded shape when grown in full sun as a specimen plant. They are tough to remove because of the dense wood, close branching and thorns, but it can be done with a good chainsaw or the help of a professional crew. Apply "Cut Vine and Stump Killer" to the freshly cut trunk to prevent re-sprouting. The product also works on seedling trunks pruned down in the fence row or mowed in the lawn.

Q. We are planting a vegetable garden for the first time. Is it too late to plant tomatoes? What else can we plant. What are the recommended tomato varieties?

A. You want to get tomatoes planted as soon as possible. Determinate varieties like Tycoon, HM 8849, Valley Cat, Celebrity, and HM1823 are recommended because they set and mature fruit before the hot weather shuts tomatoes down. Grow peppers, green beans, cucumbers, summer squash, and okra as well.

