**Solving Gardening Mysteries**

**Calvin Finch**

**Horticulturist and Director**

**Texas A&M Water Conservation and Technology Center**

It has been a good year for satsuma, lemon and grapefruit production in our backyards. A significant “blemish” on that production however is the black specks that cover many of the fruit.

The black specks are scar tissue from young grackles pecking at the fruit as it matures. We haven’t figured out why they do it or how to stop them but it is a growing issue.

The pecks do not usually penetrate the citrus peeling so they are fine to eat but it is not an attractive addition.

Why hasn’t the application of a grass-specific contact herbicide such as Grass be Gone, Over the Top, Ornamec or Vantage resulted in the kill of rescue grass, annual bluegrass or other winter grassy weeds? The grasses are definitely lush and actively growing, which is one of the characteristics required for the herbicides to work.

Sometimes it is because we don’t mix the product as the labels require, but I think this year it is mostly weather-related.

Contact herbicide must translocate from the surface of the plant foliage into the stems and down to the roots. That happens best when temperatures are warm (70 degrees) and the sun is shining. The good news is that even in cold overcast weather the herbicides will work. After the first spray, the weeds should quit growing, and after a second spray, two weeks later, the weeds should die.

If you have mature hackberry trees in the area, there will always be new hackberry seedlings but there is a way to eliminate the seedlings with one pruning cut.

As you prune the seedlings apply a drop of the product, Vine and Stump Killer, to the fresh cut. The active ingredient translocates from the cut into the plant and even into the roots to kill the seedling.

There are several versions of Vine and Stump Killer. Look for one that is applied in a container like Elmer’s glue. It is easy to use.

We changed our attitude on letting leaves decompose on the lawn rather raking them up and bagging them for landfills when we did a serious analysis of the environmental and economic costs of discarding leaves in the landfill.

Landfill space is becoming harder to find and more expensive. It doesn’t make sense to waste the space and the money to discard something that is as valuable as leaves.

Leaves decompose relatively quickly — three to four weeks — and return nutrients and organic material to the soil. It is recycling at its best.

Speed up the decomposition by running the lawn mower over the leaves to chop them into smaller pieces.

If you like the exercise and quality family time that is provided by raking leaves, you can still do it but use the leaves for mulch in the shrub border or place them in the compost pile. The unforgivable waste comes into play when the leaves are hauled away by the garbage man to fill the valuable landfill space.

**Garden Tasks**

* Leaves can be used as mulch or in the compost pile but they are also useful if you mow them on the lawn and let them decompose to supply organic material.
* Frozen tops of esperanza, poinciana, lantana and salvias can be pruned off now but consider leaving them until mid-February to provide cover for ground feeding birds.
* Fertilize your broccoli, spinach and other winter vegetables with a cup of lawn fertilizer for each 8 feet of row.
* For something different for color in the shade, look for primulas. Protect them with slug and snail bait.