Gardening Question and Answer

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Q. We had purple martins in our martin house for the first time this year. They had young but now suddenly they have disappeared. Do you have any guess what happened?

A. Yes, the purple martin adults and young pack up and move on in early July. Someplace in your area there is an assembly point where large number of the birds gather before they head to the Amazon River and other points south.

Q. Tell us about the Chinese pistache tree. My neighbor has one and I like its looks. The crown is very well formed.

A. Chinese pistache is an exotic shade tree that was identified as a Texas Superstar several years ago. It does eventually end up with a well-proportioned round crown but one of the complaints is that early in its life (8-10 years) it grows straight up with almost no crown. Chinese pistache grows at a fast rate and is very drought tolerant. It is deciduous with the sexes are on separate trees. If you get a female the tree produces huge amounts of berries in late summer. The berries are favored by the birds but they also produce some seedlings. Chinese pistache often has good fall color. The species expresses its dislike for heavy soils be displaying garish leaf color patterns during wet years but still survives.

Q. My neighbor was upset with me when I fertilized the lawn this month. He says the nitrogen is wasted and pollutes when fertilizer is applied in July. I ignore him but now I have a guilty conscience and want to hear your opinion.

A. The general recommendation for lawn fertilization from the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension in our area is to fertilize on or about May 1 and then again on or about Oct 1. The idea is to provide an amount of nitrogen that keeps the lawn healthy without waste or excessive growth. For some situations where there is heavy traffic (athletic fields) and water is available, another application at this time of the year is recommended. Nitrogen can be wasted if the lawn is not actively growing because of cold or dry weather. It also helps the cause of efficiency if the spring and summer fertilization is accomplished with slow-release fertilizer so the grass has more time to use it.

Q. I use seaweed extract to control spider mites on my tomatoes. We are experiencing some leaf burning. Could the seaweed application be causing the burn?

A. In my experience leaf burning has occurred if the seaweed extract is mixed at a rate over 2 tablespoons per gallon of water. The other caution is to apply the solution in the morning or evening when temperatures and sun intensity are reduced. Fast growing lush leaves are the most vulnerable.

Q. What is the phlox that you and Dr Parsons talk about on your radio show that is well adapted for this region and it has a fragrance that resembles lilac?

A. The plant is Fanick’s phlox. The flowers are light pink with darker pink etchings. The fragrance is very pleasant and they make a long lasting cut flower. Butterflies are attracted to the blooms as a nectar source. There is a bloom period in early summer and again in the autumn.