

Gardening Q&A

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Q. I always believed that you should not use pecan or oak leaves for mulch or in compost piles because of the tannic acid. It supposedly slowed down growth of other plants. Now I find out that my neighbor who has a very attractive garden with vegetables and flowers, uses the leave all the time. Have I been wasting valuable organic material all these years?

A. Yes, I am afraid so. High levels of tannic acid from leaves in a laboratory situation may affect growth in a negative way, but not as mulch or compost in our organic deprived, alkaline soils. Make up for the years of waste by using the leaves from now on. You will have a better garden.

Q. Is porter weed sensitive to cold weather in the high 30s? My dwarf porter weed showed leaf browning just like freeze damage. The full-size version quit blooming but the leaves did not burn.

A. The 2 versions of porter weed on our market are 2 different species that originate from different tropical regions. It would not be unexpected for them to have different degrees of cold sensitivity. A number of tropical plants (including bougainvillea) are affected by temps in the 40-degree range. So again, I wouldn't be surprised if the dwarf (red-flowered) porter weed was that cold sensitive. We will have to see if other gardeners experienced the same damage.

Q. Is there anything that controls cat's claw vine? The yellow flowers are beautiful bet it grows over small trees, covers fences and even spreads across lawns in my neighborhood. I am ready to do without the blooms to save my shrubs and trees.

A. I agree with you that it is a savage landscape invader. The stems can be cut near ground level and then Cut Vine and Stump Killer can be dabbed on the cut stem. It is a strenuous process to cut hundreds of the stems to apply the herbicide. Another thing that works if you are very careful is to spray Remedy on the cat's claw foliage that accumulates on fences. Remedy is used much like Round-up but is more potent with some capability to penetrate stems. Follow label instructions.

Q. Can we begin harvesting our greens from the garden this early. The spinach is not ready, but the chard, collards, and kale have plenty of foliage.

A. Yes, they can be harvested leaf by leaf. Limit yourself to removing one-third of the foliage per harvest to allow the plant to keep producing over a long season. Do you eat kale straight or do you mix it with collards and/or chard?

Q. It bothers me after long years of raking leaves, but I am going to take your advice and let them decompose on the lawn after I mow them. Do I need to mow them more than once?

A. Some gardeners mow them twice to speed of decomposition. A mulching mower also works if the leaves are not too thick, but mowing once usually does the job. The leaves will decompose where they lay on the lawn and contribute to the nutrient and organic material levels for the lawn.