

Gardening Q&A

Distribute 05-28-2018

Q. What is the tree with yellow berries that the birds are feasting on right now? The foliage is very dense and there are so many mockingbirds, starlings and other birds in it that it seems to be alive with their motion!

A. I believe you are describing an anaqua. It is a native evergreen that grows to about 25 feet tall on good soils. On dry hillsides anaqua will be shrubbier and less dense. The crown is very dense and in addition to producing the berries each year, it provides excellent cover for birds. Feel the leaves, they are coarse and lead to the alternate name, sandpaper tree.

Q. It appears we have spider mites on our tomato plants. The leaves are looking dusty and we can see the mites on the back of the leaves. The plants are also loaded with fruit. Is there a recommended course of action to control the mites and maximize the yield of tomatoes?

A. One option is to just spray the plants with water from the hose every day to slow down the development of the mite population. You could also immediately begin spraying a solution of 2 tablespoons of seaweed extract in a gallon of water to the underside of the leaves 3 times per week. If you just let the mites run their course you will still be able to harvest most of the fruit. When you harvest all the full-size fruit put the infested plants in a garbage sack for disposal. Minimize dropping any of the mites.

Q. I read somewhere that they recommend that you boil the sugar water mix for hummingbirds because it breaks down the chlorine in our city water. Is the chlorine in our water a problem to the birds?

A. "The Hummingbird Book" by Donald and Lilian Stokes recommends boiling the solution for one to 2 minutes to retard fermentation. Other sources, however, report that the organisms that initiate fermentation do not originate in the water but are carried by the hummingbird bill. Other sources report that boiling may slow down mold development. The normal chlorine level in our municipal water supplies is not a threat. My interpretation is that boiling is unnecessary if you change out the sugar water solution frequently enough. It is probably best in summer to only place about 3 days' worth of solution in the feeder between rinses.

Q. The zinnias in parts of my garden have mold on the leaves. What is the issue? Should I pull the plants?

A. Zinnias develop powdery mildew if the weather is rainy and the humidity is high. Usually though the disease does not develop until later in the summer. If the flowers still look good, I leave the plants showing mildew and allow them to drop their seed to produce a new generation. Another option is to pull mildewed zinnias and replace them with Dreamland transplants. The Dreamland hybrids are more mildew resistant than the heirloom zinnias.

Q. We had grubs devastate our lawn last year. We didn't treat them because it was too late in the summer before we diagnosed the problem. You recommended that we treat early next summer to prevent the same damage this year. Is now the time? What insecticide should we use?

A. Yes now is the time to apply a soil insecticide such as Bayer Soil Insecticide if you had grub damage last year. It is likely that a new crop of grubs are in the lawn now. They are small and actively feeding so will be susceptible to control by the insecticide. Follow label instructions.