

Gardening Q&A

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Q. Why do some gardeners believe that you should not use oak or pecan leaves for mulch or in the compost pile? Our neighbor grows a better vegetable garden and more attractive flowers than we do, and he insists it is because we use the leaves rather than dispose of them.

A. Leaves, especially the nut trees and oaks include tannic acid and other chemicals in varying amounts in their makeup that if they are available in dominant quantities can acidify soil and affect the growth of other plants. It is easier to cause an effect from tannins in a laboratory than in a chemically buffered soil. The net effect from the leaves as a mulch or compost ingredient is positive despite tannins in most situations including our soils. The leaves should not be wasted.

Q. Our lawn area is already being overwhelmed by weeds such as henbit, dandelions, beggars, lice, thistle and bedstraw. Is there a contact herbicide that can be applied to control them?

A. Fertilome sells a contact herbicide for broadleaf weeds that works well in the winter because it has more of a tolerance for cool temperatures than the other products. Review the label for Fertilome's "Weed Free Zone" and see if it meets the conditions you require.

Q. What is our deadline to plant broccoli and onion transplants, and lettuce, carrot, and English pea seeds for this spring? When can we plant potatoes? I am debating whether I have time to build a new raised bed garden.

A. I don't recommend that the vegetables you listed be planted after February 15, but the success is dependent on the weather conditions. February 1 is a good time to plant potatoes.

Q. We are planning our butterfly garden for next summer. What are the best butterfly plants?

A. There is a long list of good butterfly plants. You want to have plantings that provide blooms with nectar 12 months of the year and you also want to have some key egg laying plants, For nectar plants I like blue curl (Phacelia), cosmos, zinnias, mist flower, sunflower, passion vine, milkweed, Mexican flame vine, lantana, porter weed, and Fanick's phlox. Passion vine, sunflower, and milkweed are also good egg laying plants. For more info visit plantanswers.com to review my archived articles. Geyata Ajilvsgi's "Butterfly Gardening for the South" is an excellent resource.

Q. We use Japanese plum to border our driveway, I expected the fruit to be killed in the freeze of Nov 14, but it looks like the plums are intact and are continuing to develop. Do you think they will mature?

A. My fruit also looks to be undamaged, but I am pessimistic that the fruit could survive temperatures in the low 20's! Don't assemble your jelly-making supplies yet!