

Gardening Q&A

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Q. I sent you a photo of my Celebrity tomato plants. The leaves were curled and the stems black. Is it some kind of disease? Should I replace all the soil?

A. The photos were very striking. The curled leaves and scarred stems make me think that the plants have been subjected to a dose of herbicide. I know you do not think herbicide is involved but Dr Jerry Parsons agrees with me based on the photos. The curled leaves are especially distinctive. As we discussed, plant some seeds of southern peas next to the tomatoes to see if the symptoms are duplicated from the soil. It is not uncommon for herbicide applications to drift from agricultural fields or for gardeners to forget and mistakenly apply a "Weed and Feed" product to the garden. If it is a "Weed and Feed" issue the pea seedlings should show some symptoms. Also look closely at the other plants in the vicinity.

Q. Is vitex a good choice for a small tree in the landscape? My favorite nursery is promoting them.

A. Some native plant activists discourage planting vitex because they say they produce unwanted seedlings in some situations. I like them because of the attractive blooms that provide nectar to hummingbirds and pollinating insects. They are also very drought tolerant and the deer do not eat them. In my neighborhood they do not seem to produce unwanted seedlings. Before you plant one check to see if they have produced unwanted seedlings in your area.

Q. What are the best plants for attracting butterflies to our landscape?

A. My favorites are zinnias, milkweed, porter weed and mistflowers in the summer supplemented by lantanas and salvias. In the winter, the cool weather annuals such as alyssum, dianthus, calendula, and stocks are effective. Also naturalize blue curl and larkspur for early spring.

Q. We just seeded a new Bermuda grass lawn. It came up great in a week and looks good. Now we realize that we need to mow it. At what height should we mow common Bermuda grass?

A. Mow Bermuda grass as low as possible, no taller than 1.5 inches tall. If you let it grow taller you end up with stems rather than a tight sod. Tall Bermuda grass does not compete with weeds or other grasses well.

Q. My neighbor is pulling his tomato plants because they are infected with spider mites. Our tomatoes include Tycoon, Celebrity, and the Red Snapper Rodeo tomato are doing great, loaded with fruit. So far, no spider mites. Is there a preventative strategy to protect them from a spider mite infestation? I would be heartbroken if the mites ruined our harvest!

A. It sounds like your plants are far enough along and in good shape enough to mature the crop even if the spider mites show up, but some gardeners have good results by spraying a preventative spray of 2 tablespoons of seaweed extract in a gallon of water under the leaves twice per week. The tomatoes will mature by mid-June.