

Gardening Articles for week ending 15th NOVEMBER 2014

Written by Wally Richards.

HIDDEN PROBLEMS

A couple of weeks ago I was wondering why my strawberries were not performing as well as they should be for the time of the year.

I suspected the weather because of too many days of cloudy skies and chilly winds with lack of warm direct sunlight to ripen and sweeten the berries.

I had broken up the beds in June and replanted a lot of the runners coming off my best parent plants.

I left a few of the parent plants to perform another season with lots of fresh young plants.

The older plants were doing better than the young plants which is logical as they have better established root systems.

Then I noticed while spraying the plants with Mycorrhiza, small white flakes on some leaves.

By turning over a few leaves I found the main reason for lack of vigor, lots of very small aphids which obviously were sucking the goodness out of the plants.

The white flakes are the spent shells from their molts.

To get a sense of what this is like to plants you have to imagine that you have lots of fleas, lice and leeches on your body feeding. Not nice and very energy sapping.

So not only is the poor weather a problem but also thousands of sap suckers.

It's a good time to check all your plants and take particular attention to any not doing so well.

I made up a spray of Neem Tree Oil with Key Pyrethrum and Raingard in a pump up sprayer which was employed to eradicate the pests.

I love using this spray mix as it is totally safe (unless you have an allergy to any of the components) I can fold back the leaves with one hand and spray under the leaves where the pests are without any health concerns to my well being. I can't say that about all the chemical insecticides available.

Neem Oil is not a poison as it does not kill anything directly, instead it's an anti-feedent and growth regulator.

Not harmful to beneficial insects or bees as it will only have a direct effect on the pest insects feeding on foliage.

A few years back the following statement appeared on NZ Food Safety Web site; 'Neem has been

determined to be of very low toxicity.

Extracts of Neem have been used historically in parts of Asia for skin and dental treatments for what has claimed to be over 2000 years.

Parts of the Neem tree are consumed in certain Indian and Southeast Asian dishes. Neem is used in human medicine for skin and acne treatment and for the control of scabies and head lice.

The active component azadirachtin has also been demonstrated to be of very low toxicity.

Neem and azadirachtin do not represent a dietary intake risk from consumption of residues on treated food commodities.

Toxicological / Public Health Assessment : It has been determined that the use of Neem as an insecticide for use on all food producing plant species is very unlikely to pose any health risks from consumption of the harvested commodity'.

Key Pyrethrum on the other hand is also a natural insecticide which effects the nervous system of insects and fish causing death. It will affect all insects that come into contact with it, pest or beneficial.

Pyrethrum is very quickly broken down by UV so within about a couple of hours of sunlight it is no longer active.

New Zealand Bee Keepers are running a public awareness campaign to educate gardeners not to spray chemical insecticides over flowering plants because of the danger to honey bees and bumble bees.

This especially applies to chemicals from the neonicotinoid group which includes Confidor.

This is a systemic chemical (means it spreads through the whole plant) and stays inside the plants for considerable periods of time.

For the periods of withholding time from web site
http://www.agtech.com.au/label/bcsnz/CONFIDOR_12104540.pdf it says:

Onions... 7 days; Vegetable brassicas (cell transplants) - 70 days; Lettuce(cell transplants)..... 35 days; Grapes...fruit from treated vines must be destroyed, with no fruit harvested for human or animal consumption until the next season.

Remember that is the recommendations for human consumption which means that the toxicity of the chemical has fallen to the level that is presumed safe for us to eat. Not that the chemical is gone but still in the plant and in the flowers where bees will enter weeks or even months later and die as a result.

In parts of Europe where these chemicals have been banned it has been found that bees populations are recovering which is good anecdotal evidence that it does contribute to bee hive colony collapse.

Bayer the manufacture of Confidor is in the process of suing the EU because of their restrictions on using chemicals from the neonicotinoid group.

A few weeks back I wrote about the disappearance of what we used to call water tables a good few years back. In winter time you would dig a hole and it would fill with water and stay as a small pond for a long time unless you were in a very free draining area. Back then you would only have to water in very dry times as there would be ample moisture rising up from deep down to keep plants happy.

That is all changed and this week I had confirmation of this by the following;

'An alarming satellite-based analysis from NASA finds that the world is depleting groundwater - the water stored underground in soil and aquifers - at an unprecedented rate.

A new Nature Climate Change piece, "The global groundwater crisis," by James Famiglietti, a leading hydrologist at the NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory, warns that "most of the major aquifers in the world's arid and semi-arid zones, that is, in the dry parts of the world that rely most heavily on groundwater, are experiencing rapid rates of groundwater depletion."

Where is the water going? It is been piped up for irrigation systems in agriculture at phenomenal amounts.

The draw-off is greater than the aquifers ability to re-fill.

Logic tells me that we now have to irrigate more during the growing season than we did say 40 years ago. When the same is applied to agriculture; more and more water is needed to maintain grass and crops, the more water drawn up through wells, the less water available. Commonly called a death spiral.

Maybe something the EPA should look at before its too late for agriculture and us gardeners alike..

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RETRACTION and APOLOGY

My August article for week ending 16th August headed "Herbicide Damage' quoted correspondence from a reader asserting poor results from seed mix and organic compost produced by Revital Fertiliser and Revital Growwell.

Claims were also included alleging of recycled waste.

When I contacted the reader to ask permission to include the email in my article I understood (incorrectly) that the claims made by the reader were current.

I took no steps to verify the claims made by the reader and I also failed to seek any response from Revital.

The claims made in my article were unfounded and out of date. The circumstances referred to in the article concerned Revital Growwell only. There has since been a change of ownership and

management of Revital Growwell brand.

The organic compost sold by Revital Growwell undergoes stringent independent testing and is certified organic by BioGro New Zealand. I have been sent analysis reports that demonstrate this and I have been invited to visit Revital's plant to see the care they put into their product.

From all that I have seen and heard I need to set the record straight, I retract the claims made in the article and offer my sincere apology to Revital.

Wally Richards

Note Garden Gloves/Orari Nursery did not republish the article mentioned.