

Wally's Weekly News 28th March 2009
Written by Wally Richards.

MARCH GARDEN PROBLEMS

Stress in plants is very similar to stress in people, when we are under stress our immune systems are weakened and we are more likely to catch colds and have other health issues. Stress in humans comes with side effects, such as unable to obtain a good nights sleep, rushed meals or fast foods and the digestive system does not operate as well as could be; our body functions are under pressure. Thus our original stress condition is compounded with the resulting side effects.

Similarly when a plant comes into stress at this time of the year because of the hot dry conditions, it is also weakened, attracting pests and diseases, who's job in nature is to assist in taking the plant out.

The plant goes into reproductive mode, flowering profusely and setting seeds. As the plant's life is threatened it just wants to produce offspring and most, if not all its resources goes into this.

To make matters even worse the soil life including the worms, will have insufficient moisture so they disappear and reduce further the plant's ability to take in nutrients and moisture.

Sap sucking insects compound the problem and diseases such as black spot, rust and mildews run wild.

To illustrate a point, I have two areas of garden where I have silverbeet growing. One right down the back, fenced off from the free ranging chooks, which was planted up in late spring. The area is very dry with a heavy clay soil and a number of established trees which also suck most of the available nutrients and moisture out of the soil. It is not a good gardening area and I plan to put raised gardens in, with lots of compost to make great growing beds. Till this is done I have not watered as much as I should have and the silverbeet is poor looking with rust problems and going to seed.. Where in another area I do have a raised bed with ample compost and animal manures in. This area was planted with silverbeet seedlings in mid January and each night I give the bed a nice drink of filtered water (non chlorinated) with a hand held hose. Here the silverbeet is lush and already ready to harvest the outer leaves. No rust, just happy plants that have no stress problems. Worms are active which tells me that all the soil life is also. Better growing medium and a little watering daily is all that is needed to keep it right.

A gardener told me recently that a good cure for rust is a solution of **potassium permanganate** dissolved in water to make a mild concoction, then sprayed over affected plants. Repeat as needed.

We mentioned a cheap remedy sometime ago on lawns for the problem of dry spot. This occurs when the soil becomes too dry and will not accept water. To break the surface tension you simply fill a watering can with warm water and squirt some dish washing liquid into the water. Give the water a stir to make it soapy and water onto the dry spots or areas. This breaks the surface tension and water can then penetrate. The same principal can be applied to gardens that have become too dry.

It is a good idea to do this about now so that when the autumn rains come the rain water will penetrate into the soil better.

Once you have treated with the soapy water you can then water and the water will soak

into the soil.

You do not need to supply a lot of water, instead a little water every day in either the later afternoon or early morning will do nicely. If powdery mildew is a problem then it is better to water in the morning.

To assist in the control of powdery mildew simply take a heaped table spoon of baking soda, add to 1 litre of water with a mil of **Raingard** and spray.

I prefer to water by hand and at the same time I can then check plants for insect pests and any diseases that might be starting up and take the appropriate action to control. It also allows me to pull out any young weeds and pick ripening fruit before the birds start pecking them. I will often come back inside with a couple of pockets full of near ripe tomatoes to go into a bowl and finish ripening.

Leaf hoppers are into many plants at this time of the year and a few nights ago I noticed a number of them on a Brugmansia I have growing in a container, so out with the **Neem Tree Oil, Key Pyrethrum and Raingard** and a good spraying of the plant along with other plants in the area.

Next night there was not a hopper to be seen and only the odd one has turned up since. Another spray a week or so later should be in order.

For bad infestations a number of sprays of the products maybe required for a few weeks. White butterflies are flitting around my gardens so all the cabbages and brassicas along with the tomato plants have been given a dose of **Neem Tree Granules** onto the soil at the base of each plant, which helps keep the caterpillars under control.

Spider Mites are another pest insect that can run amok on plants at this time and a spray of **Liquid Sulphur** will stop them in their tracks. (Do not use with other sprays including Neem tree Oil)

You can however mix **Liquid Copper, Liquid Sulphur and Raingard** together, but dilute the copper and sulphur separately in some water before adding to the sprayer. For instance if you wanted 10 litres of spray add 35ml of **Liquid Copper** to a couple of litres of water then in another couple of litres add 25 mls of **Liquid sulphur**. Put a couple of litres of water into the sprayer and then add the diluted products. Add 10 ml of **Raingard** and the other 4 litres of water to the sprayer and agitate. You are now ready for battle. Some gardeners like to use both copper and sulphur as protectors on plants for a range of diseases.

Lawns that have built up a layer of Thatch on the soil surface can now be treated with **Thatch Busta**.

Best applied with a lawnboy for good coverage.

After application lightly water the lawn every day to keep the thatch moist.

If you are using a lawn weed killer on your lawn then you can add **Thatch Busta** to the mix and the dying weeds will disappear a lot quicker.

Once the lawns start to moisten up with the autumn rains you can lift some turf and inspect the soil for grass grubs and porina.

If you find a number of them close to the surface then it is the right time to kill them before they damage your lawn.

You can either use a chemical such as Lawn Pest Control or a natural product such as **Professor Mac's 3 in 1 for Lawns**.

The later one is best if you have pets or children that use the lawn.

Problems ring me at 0800 466464 (Palmerston North 3570606)