

Wally's weekly News 31st JANUARY 2009
Written by Wally Richards.

SUMMER PROBLEMS

We all enjoy the sunny, warm days of summer and its a real pleasure to get out into the garden and potter around. So far it has been a good summer in many areas with a reasonable amount of rain to keep our plants happy.

During dry times our soils build up surface tension, which means that water tends to shear off those spots and then sinks in further away.

This can be noticed in lawns that are irrigated and one finds that brown patches appear where water has not penetrated the soil and around the brown area we see the grasses growing lush and green.

The answer to this problem can be found in the kitchen and its your bottle of dish washing liquid.

Simply put a little warm water into your watering can, give that a squirt of dish washing liquid and then fill the watering can with more warm water. A bit of a stir and you have lovely soapy water which can be watered over the dry spots to break the surface tension of the soil.

Container plants potted up with potting mix can also develop tension both on the surface and through the mix. When you water a container that is affected you find that most of the water runs out of the drainage holes. You can overcome this problem by plunging the whole container into a tub of water.

Lots of air bubbles will bubble up as the mix becomes fully saturated.

Once it stops bubbling then raise the pot from the tub and allow surplus water to drain and put it back to where it was. You will find next time you water it the water will stay in the mix.

Hanging baskets are even worse for this problem and the baskets should be taken down and plunged every week or two.

For large containers which are too big to plunge you can use the dish washing liquid as above and water that over the mix, allow to sink in and apply some more.

Another watering idea is to take plastic soft drink bottles and cut the bottom off.

You then dig them into the soil next to the feeder root area of trees and shrubs with the neck deep into the soil and the cut base just protruding above soil level.

Now when you are watering your garden you can pour water into the bottles and this water will wet the area where it is most needed.

After a good period of rain mulches of compost can be applied over the soil to assist in the retention of ground moisture. Long term mulches of products such as bark should not be used over soils that retain water in winter around plants that can not handle wet feet.

Temporary mulches such as newspaper covered with compost are best around plants that hate water sodden soil as they will breakdown before the winter rains come and allow the soil to breath and release excessive moisture quicker.

Insect pests such as whitefly, caterpillars and leaf hoppers just love the heat of summer to breed and decimate our garden plants.

All too often we tend to take little notice of these pests when a few first appear and then respond when their populations get up into the hundreds.

Say a particular pest lays 100 eggs and within about 2-3 weeks the grubs reach maturity,

mate and from this say 50 females then lay 100 eggs each, we suddenly have 5000 of the pests doing damage to their host plants. A few weeks later we can have 250,000 grubs at work. All this in a time frame of a couple of months or so.

Large populations ruin plants and are very difficult to control so early intervention is the key to successful control.

There are a number of expensive chemical insecticides available and a number of these have little effect on their target insects as the pests have become immune to the chemical poisons.

Natural controls work better and the likes of **Key Pyrethrum, Neem Tree Oil and Neem Tree Granules** used individually or in conjunction with each other can gain you a measure of control over large populations and very good control over smaller populations.

The pyrethrum affects the nervous systems of insects and fish, breaking it down and killing the pests.

Pyrethrum is used in a number of fly sprays.

Neem Tree Oil is mainly an anti-feedent which means that it stops the pests ability to eat and they starve to death over the following days.

When we mix the two together and spray we have a quick knock down followed by a control period of about 7 days.

The two sprays should only be used late in the day just before sunset as the pyrethrum is quickly broken down by UV.

Also once the sun is off the plants the oil will not damage the foliage as it can in direct sunlight, being oil, burning the leaves.

Neem Tree Granules still have some of the Neem properties and these can be sprinkled onto the soil in the root zone of the affected plants so that when the granules breakdown the properties will be taken up by the plant's roots. You can further enhance this aspect by watering some **Neem Tree Oil** over the granules and soil, made up at the rate of 25mls per litre of water.

This puts a good dose of Neem into the tree or plant which translocates through to the foliage and affects insects feeding. It is also a great way to control borer in trees.

If a combination of both the above are used then you can make some good headway in control of the pests affecting those plants.

Another point is that you may clean up the pests on your target plants to find soon after they are back as bad as before. The reason for this is there will be other plants nearby that have the same insect feeding on them and they re-colonise your target plants.

So check right around the area for the same pests on both plants and weeds.

If they happen to be next door then your problem will continue until winter knocks them back unless they are also controlled.

Problems ring me at 0800 466464 (Palmerston North 3570606)