

## DECEMBER GARDENING

December is the first month of summer according to the seasonal calendar and we are now starting to see a little settling of the weather. I am always amazed at how wide the differences are between areas of the country and how what used to be reliable patterns year after year are now very different and harder to predict.

It would appear that new patterns, that have started developing in the last few years, are becoming the new norm and if anything these patterns are intensifying.

I can only talk of the patterns where I am in Palmerston North; that for last few years have been crappy weather for spring and early summer. In the last few seasons we have had a false spring about August then the weather turned to custard till the new year.

This year we never saw the false spring, just un-seasonal weather for spring along with numerous cold snaps. The results of this means the warmth loving plants such as tomatoes, cucumbers and corn have not done well. My tomatoes and cucumbers even in the glasshouse have only slowly grown and are about 8 weeks behind where they should be.

Numerous gardeners have said the same from other parts of the country and those without glasshouses have fared worse.

Chilly winds and cold night temperatures are of no help to those plants that enjoy nice warm constant temperatures. Even my strawberries have not done well and have only recently starting to produce some bigger ripe berries.

Hardy plants on the other hand, because of the extending day light hours, weeds, lawns, brassicas and lettuce are growing very well.

Not so good in areas where you have not had reasonable rain fall. These drought prone areas appear to becoming really difficult to garden and farm.

There is a silver lining in so much as many insect pests have not reproduced well and thus they have not become a real problem yet.

Plant diseases that thrive in these weather patterns which place stress on plants result in black spot, rust, mildews and blights causing damage to the foliage of roses and other plants.

You can treat for the diseases but as most are not fatal to established plants it can be better to allow nature to run its course and when the weather improves, new growths will take over and plants will start to look better again.

Simple sprays of baking soda with Raingard or alternatively sprays of Condys Crystals are inexpensive and will likely give greater improvements plus protection than the expensive chemical concoctions.

The insect problems are starting to happen with a bit of warmer weather and their populations will explode once the weather settles down.

If you can stop the rapid increase in pest populations from happening you will have better plants and gardens later on.

So far the tomato/potato psyllid populations have not started to build up because the temperatures have not being good for their breeding.

They are around and in my glasshouse the sticky yellow whitefly traps are catching several adults each week along with other pest adult insects. The sticky yellow pads are a great line of defense for glasshouses or out in the garden.

I am also using the silicon cell strengthening program on all the plants in the glasshouse and so far it appears to be working well. The test will come when the weather settles.

A word of caution is with potatoes growing outdoors that have reached maturity and are ready to harvest or will be soon.

I had a gardener last year that left his potatoes in the ground after they had matured with the tops still on. They harvested a couple of plants and the tubers were of a good size and lovely to eat.

The same with the next couple of plants harvested. But when it came to the following ones, including the rest of the crop, the potatoes had the black rings inside them and tasted bad.

Now after finding out that the crop was ready if he had either harvested all the potatoes or alternatively cut the tops off at ground level and covered the stumps with soil then the tubers would be safe from psyllid attack.

Potato crops planted within the last couple of months or so and even if planting now will need to be protected from the psyllids.

Rhododendrons come under attack from thrips about this time of the year causing the silvery leaves which is the scar tissue from the pests feeding.

There is an easy solution by just sprinkling Wallys Neem Tree Granules from the trunk to the drip line. Repeat about 8 weeks later.

Citrus trees should also be treated the same way to prevent insect pests from establishing.

Aphids on roses and other plants can be controlled with a combination spray of Key Pyrethrum and Wallys Neem Tree Oil. Mixed with warm water and sprayed just before dusk to take care of pest insects on the plants.

That includes leaf hoppers, mealy bugs, beetles, caterpillars, psyllids, whitefly etc.

The black pear/cherry slugs will be starting up about now and when you see them on your plum, cherry or pear trees spray the tree with Wallys Liquid Copper.. Like the garden slugs and snails they cant handle being in contact with copper.

A second generation will appear in about February if you dont control the first flush, they will do far

more leaf damage.

There are grass grub beetles out in early evening feeding on some of your plants.

If you find holes in the leaves of plants but no culprits to be found then likely its either beetles or birds.

Go out with a torch after sunset and check the plants for beetles.

If you find them then make up the Key Pyrethrum spray and spray them directly as if they were flies using fly spray.

Key Pyrethrum is a more natural quick knock down, used at only one mil per litre of water and has only a one day withholding period on food crops.

Porina caterpillars in the lawn are easily controlled with Wallys Neem tree Oil.

Cut the lawn so the grasses are shorter and then just before sunset spray the grass with the Neem Oil mixed at 15 mls per litre of warm water. Spray to get the solution to the base of the grass where the caterpillars feed. Later when they come out to feed they will get a dose of the oil and then starve to death.

Neem Oil is safe for animals, children and bees on the lawn where the chemical poisons are not.

In fact on dogs for fleas simply take the Neem Oil and mix with an equal amount of shampoo and use that on your moggies.

There are many safe alternatives to use in your garden that are not likely to cause you health problems or problems for your children, pets and beneficial insects such as Lady Birds and Bees.