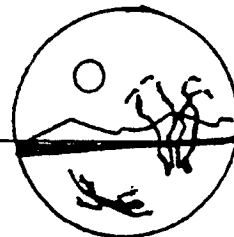


High on the Desert

Cochise County Master Gardener

Newsletter



The University of Arizona and U.S. Department of Agriculture cooperating.

Gophers, Snakes, and Spiders— OH MY!

As I sit here looking out the window “admiring” the work done by the local landscaping crew of gophers, I wonder why their work is more evident now than in spring or summer? In *Tiny Game Hunting*, a book about environmentally healthy ways to trap and kill pests in the house and garden, five pages are dedicated to the pocket gopher. Gophers eat a wide variety of plants, starting with the roots, to include roses, tomatoes, fruit trees, squash, melons, tulips, garlic, and I might add, agaves and prickly pear. Of course, the gophers always find and destroy the most prized plants.

The book explains various ways to combat the gopher via repellants, trapping, flooding, and fumigation and advises the reader not to underestimate the gopher’s predators, which include cats and dogs, owls and hawks, and coyotes and snakes. “Local pet stores sometimes have Gopher or King

Snakes,” the author’s state, “Try putting a snake down a gopher hole and let it take care of business.” Well now—this certainly makes sense as I see more gopher damage during snake hibernation season. Score one for snakes!

Some of you might know my fear of snakes but I must admit I thoroughly enjoyed the seminar at the 1998 High Desert Garden Fair about Beneficial Snakes for the Garden by John Porter. I first met John at the Southwest Wings Festival where I asked him a lot of questions about snakes and dogs. Last summer I had the pleasure of witnessing three snakes visiting the yard. The first was a HUGE Gopher Snake, *Pituophis melanoeucus*, that came into the dog run and hid under the steps. I immediately knew that there was something wrong by the actions of my dogs. Gopher Snakes are also known as Bull Snakes, look very much like a Rattlesnake, and are one of the most common snakes found in the United States—we must be a nation of gophers! To get rid of the snake I just closed the dog door and the snake took no time at all to leave the premises. To prevent snakes from

entering the dog run again I plan to attach hardware cloth at least 3 feet high to the dog run. John advises me that rattlesnakes will usually not go over something this high in search of food. Snake number two scared the heck out of me when I entered the vegetable garden one day. Out of the corner of my eye there was this quick flash accompanied with the rustling noise among the sunflowers. My first reaction was to run for the garage, grab my flat-edged shovel, find the snake and—well you get the picture. Instead I cautiously but curiously searched for the source of noise. What I saw was a beautiful Western Patch-nosed Snake, *Salvadora hexalepis*, with a lizard halfway down its throat. I stood there in awe watching it as it stared back at me in probable displeasure by my intrusion. I saw it again a few days later and to my surprised sadness never again. I must have run out of lizards. The last snake, a Coachwhip, *Masticophis flagellum*, was found in our garage tangled in bird netting. This has been the third time I have found something tangled in its awful web.

(Continued on next page)

Cochise County Cooperative Extension

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Bird netting is a tight, one inch weave of black plastic used to cover fruit and nut trees to discourage hungry birds. My neighbor and I liberated a Coachwhip snake and a Regal Horned Lizard, *Phrynosoma solare*, from its snare two summers ago. I have since then disposed of this ugly stuff but if you use it, please be cautioned on its potential hazard of trapping things and store it away safely.

Due to learning as much as I care to about snakes, I have gained a healthy respect for snakes. Even though I can't say that I love them or even like them, attending seminars like John's proves the value of knowledge is power. Instead of being scared of them and feeling the need to kill them I have learned the skills needed on how to deal and live with them peacefully.

Now an interesting tidbit about the Black Widow Spider, *Latrodectus hesperus*. During the course of receiving *Agave palmeri*'s at the Plant Sciences Center, I jotted down in my journal that during trimming and prepping of the agaves I found quite a few Black Widow Spiders and egg sacs on the plants. Interesting, I came across an article in *Desert Plants*, Vol. 7, Number 2, 1985 which states that on field-grown evaluation trials of agaves in Arizona showed that complete biological control of the agave weevil was achieved by



Black Widow Spiders. Who would ever think of saying, "Score one for the Black Widow Spider!"

Cheri Melton, Master Gardener

What to do - - - February

In general, February is a quiet month for gardens and a good time to catch up on gardening chores you put off during January. Most of the projects listed in last month's column can still be started in February, but by the end of this month (if not sooner) you should have finished your winter pruning and bare-root planting.

Winter pruning: Pruning of deciduous trees should be finished by the middle of February. If you wait any longer, you may be removing buds as well as branches. (See the back page of this newsletter for details on Rob Call's upcoming fruit and nut tree pruning demo.)

Pruning rose bushes: We recommend holding off on heavy pruning of your roses until the end of this month and into early March. Choosing the best time to prune roses is extremely difficult. It should be done two weeks before the buds appear, and not even Houdini can accurately predict when that might be. (A University of Arizona Cooperative Extension pamphlet *Roses for Arizona* is available. Contact the Sierra Vista or Willcox office for a copy.)

Cold-moist stratify seeds: There is still time to cold-stratify seeds for sowing indoors in March. Check seed packets and gardening books for information on whether a particular seed needs to be cold-stratified, as well as for how long, and plan your cold-stratifying and sowing dates around this information. The seeds need to be placed in a sterile growing medium such as peat moss or vermiculite (although paper towels also work) and kept moist.

Plant bare-root trees: Remember to provide a large enough hole for

your tree. It may seem like a lot of extra work at planting time, but in two or three years your tree's roots will have outgrown a smaller planting hole. The tree may appear healthy for those two or three years and then mysteriously begin to decline. (See The University of Arizona new planting guidelines.)

Prepare spring planting beds: Break up and prepare the soil in new planting beds, adding soil amendments and organic matter, compost, or well-rotted manure.

Clean and repair drip irrigation systems: Check hoses for leaks and emitters for clogged ends.

Finalize spring garden plans: Begin collecting seeds for spring (cool season) vegetable gardens. Decide if you'll want any major changes in your landscape or garden this year. Spend more time thinking about your gardens and how you might solve any problems you had last year.

Keep watering: In an arid environment it is risky to set watering guidelines; so much depends on the type of plant, how long it has been in your garden, the amount of rain we've had, wind, sun, and soil conditions, and whether you deep or surface water. The most foolproof method to watering is to check each plant with a soil probe or metal rod. Press the probe into the soil around your tree as far down as it will go. The easier the probe moves through the soil, the moister the soil is. If you get strong resistance in the first foot or two of soil around your trees, they need deep watering. They will probably need deep watering at least once a month throughout the winter.

Jackie Dillon-Fast
former Cochise County Master Gardener
(Reprinted from the Cochise County Master Gardener Newsletter, February 1990)

Cuttings 'N' Clippings

- Cochise County Master Gardeners Association meets the first Wednesday of each month at 5:00 pm at the Mona Bishop Room of the Sierra Vista Library. The speaker for February 3 is Cecile Lumer, a pollination biologist, who will speak on plant pollination.
- The Sierra Vista Area Gardeners Club will visit the Rose Tree Inn in Tombstone on Feb. 26. For information call Winnie Dill at 456-1437.

Honey Compost (Killer bees visit the garden!)

We have one of those plastic compost bins that you can buy at the home improvement stores. In mid-December, I was out watering some trees and while walking past the bin with the hose it seemed a good idea to put some water on the compost. I opened the top and started pouring water in and did a double-take when it seemed as if the compost was “melting.” In that instant, I realized that I was pouring water on a swarm of bees! I quickly closed the bin and got away.

Knowing that most of the bees in Southeastern Arizona are Africanized (“Killer Bees”) and that the European honeybees don’t swarm in winter (these had only recently decided to call the compost bin home) I knew I was lucky that the

cold bath didn’t cause them to come after me! They were no doubt “killer bees” as I was to learn from an expert.

Because of so much publicity about Africanized bees, my first thought was to call the Fire Department to see about getting rid of them. They said that they don’t usually do this unless the bees are attacking a person or animal—an emergency to which they will respond. The foam which they use is quite expensive, I understand. I didn’t really like the idea of killing the bees anyway—we gardeners need bees to pollinate our crops.

The Cooperative Extension office has the phone numbers of several bee keepers who will remove swarms from your home (they charge for this service). I called Gilbert, a beekeeper who lives in Sierra Vista. This was a real learning experience for me.

“Don’t try this at home!”

Gilbert explained that he would come during the day to get the queen bee, put her in a small cage inside a box, and the rest of the bees would follow “Mother” into the box. After dark, he would return to pick up the box full of bees. Most of the time, after the bees have settled down at his place, he will “re-queen” them—placing a European honeybee queen with them and removing the Africanized queen. This will ensure that all the progeny from this swarm will have the European genes and will no longer be the aggressive Africanized type.

I watched (from a safe distance) as Gilbert put on his bee-keeper’s hat and veil, then with a “smoker” puffed smoke at the bees to help calm them. He reached in the compost bin bare-handed and fished around to find the queen. He said that the Africanized bees are very unpredictable, unlike the

European variety. He found the honeycomb and there was even a little bit of honey. After some time, and being stung once when he laid his hand on a spot where a bee was sitting, he found the queen. I wondered how he knew which one was the queen, so he showed her to me. She’s the one wearing the ermine trimmed red cloak and teeny-tiny tiara! Actually, she’s somewhat larger than the worker bees, although if I were searching through a mass of buzzing bees I’m not sure I’d be able to tell which was larger! Obviously it takes experience and practice. He put the queen in her little plastic cage, which has holes so that the workers can see, smell and even feed her while she’s in there. Then he placed the cage inside a shoe box with a square opening cut in the side. Some of the worker bees started going into the shoe box immediately, and they sat on the edge of the opening, fanning their wings to spread the scent which told all the other bees exactly where the queen was and where they should go to join her. Soon most of the bees were inside the box and Gilbert left it near the compost bin where he could pick it up that night.

One of the worker bees didn’t go into the box, and seemed to be following Gilbert and me around to the front of the house. Gilbert caught it by the wings, and showed me the wax glands on it’s abdomen. Then he let it sting him on the finger so that I could smell the venom, which has a strong banana oil odor!

If you would like to know more about the Africanized bees, the Cooperative Extension office at 458-8278, Ext. 141 has several brochures which they can mail to you upon request.

Maggi Crist, Master Gardener

High on the Desert

Hurry!!! Just a short time until the High Desert Gardening & Landscaping Conference!!! If you haven't registered yet, please use the form enclosed in this newsletter—you won't even have to pay the late fee!

See you there!

The Agent's Observations

Q I have some eldarica pines that have funny curling needles. They occur on last years needles but form nearly complete circles. What is happening to these needles and will it affect the future growth of the trees?

A The damage to the needles is caused by eriophyid mites. There are probably more unknown and undescribed species of these mites than any other group of arthropods. They are very small and are measured in micrometers or microns. They are worm-like and slow moving. Injury in conifer species is expressed by chlorotic

needles, and/or dwarf, distorted, or short needles. Also by rosette bud/needle clusters similar to a witches'-broom, by galls, and by partial defoliation of old as well as the current season's needles. Eriophyid mites are found in or on the buds and foliage of all North American conifer species. Many other plants are affected by these animals including deciduous trees and shrubs.

Control: There are no control measures that are recommended for eriophyid mites on conifers. The effects of the damage will not cause the plants to die, however, they can cause unusual growth.

Source: *Insects That Feed on Trees and Shrubs*. Warren T. Johnson and Howard H. Lyon. 1991. Cornell University Press. page 122.

Q How long can I wait to prune my fruit trees, ornamental shrubs and rose bushes? Some seem to have bud swelling occurring.

A With the warm winter we have had this year many plants have had their rest and much of the dormancy requirements met. This does not bode well for the fruit crop this year because of the possibility of early bloom and freezing temperatures.

Fruit trees should have major pruning done during the dormant season, after rest is completed. In Cochise County that is usually after the first of the year. If pruning is done too early plant damage from cold and freezes can occur. Fruit trees can be pruned until flower pedals fall. For stone

fruits; *i.e.* apricots, almonds, cherries, peaches, plums and nectarines and for pome fruits; *i.e.* apples, pears and quince, pruning can continue until bloom is completed. Small fruits; *i.e.* blackberries, grapes, raspberries, currants and gooseberries are best pruned during the dormant season.

Grapes can be pruned through bloom but have a tendency to "bleed." This is not as detrimental as one might think and it is better to prune grapes a little late than let them grow in to a knurled mass! **Blackberries and raspberries** bare fruit on one-year old canes. The two-year old canes need to be removed because they have born fruit and are dead. Thinning out weak canes can also be done through bloom.

Currents and gooseberries should be dormant pruned by removing wood that is three-years old by cutting it back to the base or to a main branch.

Ornamental shrubs generally are pruned after flowering, however some species have other requirements. Consult a good pruning book like *Sunset's Pruning Handbook* or call the Extension Office.

Roses are dormant pruned except in the case of climbing roses which are pruned after flowering. A pamphlet entitled *Roses for Arizona*, is available at the Extension Office which discusses pruning different classes of roses.

Robert E. Call
Extension Agent, Horticulture

NOTE: See back page for information on the Fruit & Nut Tree Pruning Demo—February 18!!!

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FRUIT & NUT TREE PRUNING DEMO

Thursday, February 18, 1999
1:00 pm

2709 Kalispell, Sierra Vista

(South on Highway 92 to Kachina Trail, right on Kachina Trail
to Equestrian, left on Equestrian to Kalispell, right 3 blocks to
NW corner of Kalispell and Sauk.)

Demonstration given by Robert E. Call
Extension Agent, Horticulture
The U of A Cooperative Extension
458-8278, Ext. 141

Everyone is welcome!

Love plants? Looking for a job?

Ace Garden Place, Sierra Vista, is seeking part-time help to water and care for their nursery stock. They have two job openings that will be 12 to 20 hours per week beginning in early March. Interested? Call Jerry Ambrose at 458-3650 for more details!

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*Robert E. Call*

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Extension Agent, Horticulture  
Carolyn Gruenhagen  
Editor