

June 2014

Timely Tips for June

by Donna Hagar, Somervell County Master Gardener

Ahh, wasn't all the rain we got in May just wonderful? Everything greened up and flourished. You could tell the trees, grass and shrubs were heaving a huge sigh of relief! This is a great time to want to sit back and really enjoy our lush and thriving landscapes. But what if that was it? What if the rains will be fewer and farther between? What can we do to keep our trees, plants, gardens and lawns happy?



For starters, MULCH! This is something we Master Gardeners push very hard, as it makes such a difference in retaining moisture and keeping weeds at bay. And I'm not talking a scattering or just top dressing of mulch. More like 3-4 inches thick. Just make sure the soil underneath is good and moist before you load that much on top. If you have drip irrigation or soaker hoses, place these under the mulch, as it takes quite a bit of water to get thru that thick layer of mulch. When you do water, you want to make sure you are actually watering the soil so plants can get their much needed drink.

Be sure to stay on top of weeds. We don't want our precious plants competing with weeds for water and nutrients. That thick layer of mulch will certainly help keep weeds at bay as well. And weeds that do come up in heavily mulched beds generally have germinated in the mulch itself and will pull up very easily.

In the vegetable garden, as crops are harvested and completed bearing, be sure to keep weeds in check in areas that have been vacated. Add organic matter and keep the area mulched to be ready for fall crops that will begin going in next month.



Oh and by the way, if you have tomatoes or squash with blossom end rot on the bottom or are cracked and split toward the top, this can easily be attributed to the fluctuations in moisture.

Blossom-end rot (BER) is generally caused by a lack of calcium being taken up in the plant. Soil moisture fluctuations we have had lately can reduce the uptake of calcium in the plant and can lead to BER.

The cracking is caused when the tomatoes get too much water too fast and the skin can't stretch enough to accommodate. These are still edible by cutting off affected areas. Keep the soil consistently moist (ah, that ever important mulch can help) and both conditions can be kept under control for future harvests.

Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush

by Katie Hunholz, Somervell County Master Gardener

The nursery rhyme, “Here we go round the mulberry bush”, first published in 1840, can produce a little confusion since mulberries do not grow on bushes, but rather on trees. The mulberry is from the family Moraceae, and the genus *Morus*. There are many different species of Mulberry, but the 3 most well- known are black, red, and white. But, other than being found in 2 popular nursery rhymes (“Pop goes the weasel” being the second), what makes mulberry so important?



The primary value of the mulberry is that the white mulberry is the sole food source for silkworms. To make a single silk blouse about 8,800 pounds of leaves were required. In case you are not familiar with silkworms, let me give you a brief overview of this famous insect. Silk- which is still used today in the finest of clothing, sheets, and scarves- is best known for its incredibly smooth, soft, and silky texture. Silk is made using the cocoon of the silkworm moth, which is created by the larvae of the moth as it enters the pupal stage. Silkworms, the larval stage of the lifecycle of the silkworm moth, are not actually worms, but rather caterpillars. Silk was first used in ancient Chinese cultures, but quickly became a coveted product by the rest of the world, traveling along what is referred to as the ‘silk road’. White mulberry is now considered an exotic invasive species, since it is taking over the territory of the red mulberry. It was first brought to Europe, then to the United States, in an attempt to establish the silk industry in those places.

Not only is mulberry critical for the silk industry, but it has also been influential in the areas of food, nutrition, livestock fodder, building materials, crafts, and ecology. Here is a summary of its many other uses:

- **Food:** The fruit of the mulberry can be eaten either cooked, or raw. Black and red mulberry have the strongest flavor, but the berries of the white mulberry can be eaten as well. Mulberries are well known for their use in wines, cordials, teas, tarts, and pies.
- **Nutrition:** The fruit of the mulberry contains several powerful antioxidants and vitamins, including anthocyanins, resveratrol, vitamin C, vitamin E, and vitamin A. Native Americans used red mulberry to treat dysentery, as well as using it as a laxative. Anthocyanins are being researched as a treatment for cancer, inflammation, diabetes, and the effects of aging. Resveratrol can help combat the risk of strokes. And, of course, all vitamins are necessary for our bodies to function correctly.

- **Livestock:** The leaves of white mulberry are used not only as a food source for silkworms, but they can also be fed to livestock. It is believed that cattle fed white mulberry leaves have a higher milk yield.
- **Building materials:** The wood of the mulberry tree is known for its flexibility and durability. These characteristics make it an ideal material for sporting goods such as hockey sticks, tennis rackets, and cricket bats. The wood is also used in fence posts, home building materials, and furniture.
- **Crafts:** The twigs of the mulberry tree are often used to weave baskets, while the stems are used for making paper.
- **Ecology:** For those desiring to attract wildlife, the berries are enjoyed by wild birds, game birds, and hogs. If wildlife is not desirable, mulberry trees can serve as buffers which attract the pests away from crops or fruit trees.

As has been illustrated, mulberry trees have an abundance of uses. Such an amazing plant should be known for more than its appearance in children's nursery rhymes.

Sources:

Laws, Bill. 2012. Fifty Plants that Changed the Course of History. New York. Firefly Books, Inc. p. 130-33.

Purdue
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