

Diggin' in the Dirt: It's Really Dry

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Soil crusting

Some seeds really have to struggle. Carrot, lettuce, dill, beet, and chard all have to work to get through soils that have formed a significant crust. Given our standard clay-based soils and any rainfall or sprinkler irrigation, crusting is a fact of life.

The enterprising gardener will plan for crusts. Sensitive seed should be sowed in furrows and covered with potting mix instead of the soil. Floating row covers, which are useful in keeping the carrot rust fly out of the carrot patch, also intercept the drops of rain and allow the water to float softly to earth, slowing the crusting process.

It is really dry

We have a rain gauge at the Extension office. The total for May is less than two tenths of an inch. This is almost an inch and a half less than normal. The recent June rains helped but from January to the present, we are still about four inches short. I recently had to dig a hole about two feet deep. There was much less moisture in the lower levels than I expected. What will this mean for gardeners? Trees and shrubs planted this spring or last year will need water soon. Overwintering crops like garlic, which rarely need water in the spring, will need some. Transplants like tomatoes, squash, cabbage, and peppers will need longer irrigations to move moisture lower.

Blueberries should be watered from now until fall. Blackberry varieties like Marions, Boysens, and Logans are deeper rooted but still will need water soon. So will apples on some of the more "dwarfing" rootstocks.

Garlic looks good

Garlic generally benefits from drier springs. There are far less leaf and bulb disease issues. One watering now should carry garlic through until harvest in July. For those of you that grow "hardneck" garlic, the flower scapes are starting to show. There are two reasons to remove them. First, they take energy away from bulb growth. Early scape removal will give you larger bulbs at harvest. Equally important, scapes are great. Chefs in Portland love scapes and they are sold for quite a bit of money as a seasonal food. As they mature, the scape stems become fibrous and are less edible. With drier conditions, some garlic might be ready a bit earlier than usual. Start looking closely at the end of June. Elephant garlic could easily be ready in the last week of June. Normal harvest for regular garlic is mid-July but that might be bumped up a week or so this year.

Flea beetles active – guard your cabbage and tomato family crops

Flea beetles sometime show up in bunches. This seems to be one of those years. Flea beetles are small, dark bronze to black jumpers that chew pinhole sized holes in your crop leaves. Their larva also have chewing mouthparts and they feed underground, gnaw-

ing away the fine and not so fine roots. Larva do significant damage to potatoes. Flea beetles are most damaging on seedlings and transplants. They are quite capable of eliminating an entire planting almost overnight. Flea beetles are very mobile and are capable of migrating to better crops (from their standpoint) by smell and a great deal of enthusiasm. There can be one (cabbage flea beetle) to three (potato flea beetle) generations per summer. Adults overwinter and start feeding and mating as the weather warms in mid to late spring.

With hungry mobile adults and larva that feed on seedling roots, you can probably guess they are hard to manage. Crop rotation can help but that is less true for gardens where everything is in closer proximity than commercial farms. Row covers can help if they are tightly fitted to the ground and aren't covering an area where there was flea beetle damage last year. There is some evidence that loose straw mulch laid between the crop rows, can harbor predatory insects and spiders, and might help. Commercial organic growers are using cabbage family varieties that cabbage flea beetles really love as a trap crop to either divert their attention or concentrate them where they can be sprayed with an organic spinosad-based insecticide. The same insecticide has been used as a crop protectant directly with decent results. For more information on flea beetles see <http://cru.cahe.wsu.edu/CEPublications/PNW640/PNW640.pdf> and <http://www.maine.gov/dacf/php/gotpests/bugs/factsheets/flea-beetles-oreg.pdf>

squash family, hazelnuts, alders, birches, and a number of other species.

The amount of pollen cones is determined by the conditions for growth the previous spring. If you remember, it rained a lot in April and May last year, prime time for the growth of new Douglas fir shoots. The better the conditions, the more pollen and seed "cone" buds are produced. They develop slowly and don't shed pollen, or for the females, get fertilized until the following spring. In tough conditions, the cell structures that had been programmed to become cones convert to shoot growth. That increases the light capture and helps the tree grow more shoots and roots. Anyway, conditions for cone initiation were very good in the spring of 2017 and thus, we had an extraordinary number of male cones blown off by the wind recently when their work of shedding their yellow-orange pollen was done. There should also be a heavy seed cone crop this fall. The total process from cone initiation to seed ripeness takes about 17 months. Douglas fir usually doesn't start flowering (cone making) until they are 12-15 years old.

Take excess produce to the food bank, senior centers, or community meals programs. Cash donations to buy food are also greatly appreciated.

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What are those small red "cones" that covered my roof, deck, and driveway?

I got a number of calls the last several weeks about papery, small (1/4-1/2 inch), red-brown cones covering roofs and driveways. Most callers suspected they were from Douglas fir trees and they were right. What we have seen is a prodigious number of "pollen cones" coming off fir trees. Douglas fir is one of those plants that have male (pollen shedding) and female (pollen receiving and where the egg is fertilized) flowers on the same plant. This is not at all uncommon in the plant world. It is found in the

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