

Diggin' in The Dirt: Spring Arrives, But Rain Doesn't

By Chip Bubl
Oregon State University
Extension Service - Columbia County
Will we have fruit?

Cold weather may have affected fruit set. Two factors are in play. First, if at your location, blossoms faced sub-freezing temperatures, they may be damaged. With apples we can lose a lot of bloom and still have a crop if late or early blooms set fruit. With cherries, we want all the fruit we can get, so each blossom lost is significant. That said, blooms in many locations were slow to open which might help.

Second, honeybees have been sluggish. There are lots of reports of dead hives. Varroa mites and running short of food in the very cold February through April period are probably, alone or in combination, to blame. Mason bees emerged and are active. This is a hard year to read.

Spring arrives, but rain doesn't

We finally got some great gardening weather. Cold warmed to cool and then warmed to quite pleasant. But concern is building about the amount of moisture in our soils. Rainfall from the beginning of our "water year" (which starts October 1) through this week is about 9 inches below normal! We are 5 inches below normal since the start of 2019. This is Scappoose data and Vernonia might be different. But the implications for gardeners are clear. We must start watering woody plants, especially ones that were planted either this year or last. They may not have enough of a root

system to cope with meager soil moisture. Deep watering will help. Garlic, which rarely needs May water, should be watered. Same with blueberries, strawberries, and possibly black and Marion berries. Earlier water will be needed for fruit trees, especially those on "dwarfing" rootstocks. Commercial farmers of these crops and others are now in full irrigation mode.

Columbia County has been heavily logged over the past three to four years. A lot of young Douglas fir and other seedlings were planted this spring. Their survival now is in question. The earlier they were planted, the better.

The larger picture is grim. Stream flow could fall precipitously, putting salmon and other aquatic species at risk. Insects that need pollen and/or succulent tissues to consume may not find enough to eat. Birds and bats that eat insects may struggle.

On a larger scale, there could be a greater risk from forest or field fires. Learn what you can do to protect your house and property.

It is possible that rain will come later but history indicates that is very unlikely.

Large ant hills

I get a number of calls each year about large ant mounds created by the western thatching ant. The mounds are created from plant debris consisting in our area mainly of grass stems, fir needles, and small twigs. In my experience, most of the mounds are constructed on the edge of a forest/hedgerow and pasture. Sometimes, they can be found deep in a forest but that is less common. The western thatching ant (*Formica obscuripes*) is responsible for all the work. The mounds start small, as all great construction must, but can rise to significant stature. We had one mound on the edge of our forest that was about five feet tall and at least four feet across. That particular colony was at least 15 years old. But three years ago, it was

abandoned. Each colony may contain as many as one million ants, though colonies are usually half that or less.

The queens (yes, they often have more than one) are kept deeply hidden in the structure. As the weather warms, the large caste worker ants go into high gear, collecting juicy bits from any stray caterpillar or dead mouse in the vicinity. The middle caste ants are aphid ranchers, tending "their" aphids as they suck the sugars from plants like Canada thistle and a variety of trees and shrubs. In turn, the ants protect the aphids from lady beetles and wasps that want to eat them. It appears that an ant has its own work site and will return to

strong mandibles deliver a formic acid-laced jolt that can be quite painful. But that response generally happens only when you mess with the nest. Otherwise, these clever ants are considered the garbage detail of the forest. They consume pests, recycle small carcasses, and capture termite queens in August. There are hints, though no definitive research, that thatching ants compete with carpenter ants for the same food sources and may reduce the carpenter ant colonies where they overlap with theirs. Thatching ants do not invade your house and chew wood like carpenter ants.

They are beneficial and unless they make the mistake of putting their nest in a very inappropriate place (like in the middle of your garden) they should be left alone. With the western tent caterpillar outbreak gathering steam in parts of Columbia County, thatching ants will be feasting on the caterpillars and helping to contain their spread. In Europe, you are specifically asked not to kill the colonies since they are so important to forest health.

Free newsletter (what a

deal!)

The Oregon State University Extension office in Columbia County publishes a monthly newsletter on gardening and farming topics (called Country Living) written/edited by yours truly. All you need to do is ask for it and it will be mailed or emailed to you. Call (503) 397-3462 to be put on the list. Alternatively, you can find it on the web at <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/columbia/> and click on newsletters.

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

The Extension Service offers its programs and materials equally to all people.

Contact information for the Extension office

Oregon State University
Extension Service – Columbia County
505 N. Columbia River Highway
(across from the Legacy clinic)
St. Helens, OR 97051
(503) 397-3462
Email: chip.bubl@oregonstate.edu



a given aphid-covered thistle stem every day. The ants eat very small amounts of fresh plant material. The smallest ants tend the brood and queen.

Unlike carpenter ants, there are no mass nuptial flights. The winged males and females tend to emerge singly and mate, often not flying at all. The female only accepts one male, unlike most ant queens. Then it gets more interesting. Often, the fertilized queen will return to the nest and join the other queens in producing brood. Sometimes, she will gather a group of workers of all three castes and form a new nest nearby. Where ranges overlap, the queen can enter the nest of a *F. rufa* or other related species, bite the head off the queen and convince the workers by her chemical communication skills to tend her brood. Ultimately, the nest converts to *F. obscuripes*.

The black bodied, red headed ants will bite when provoked. Their

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