

# Ricky's Gardening Tips and Tricks and Home Horticulture

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**Ricky's Gardening Tips and Tricks and Home Horticulture** is an online newsletter designed to provide citizens of Allen County and northeastern Indiana with up-to-date information about Horticulture and home issues, written in a lighthearted style! To subscribe, send an email to [kemeryr7@frontier.com](mailto:kemeryr7@frontier.com).

## La Nina Continues Nexstar

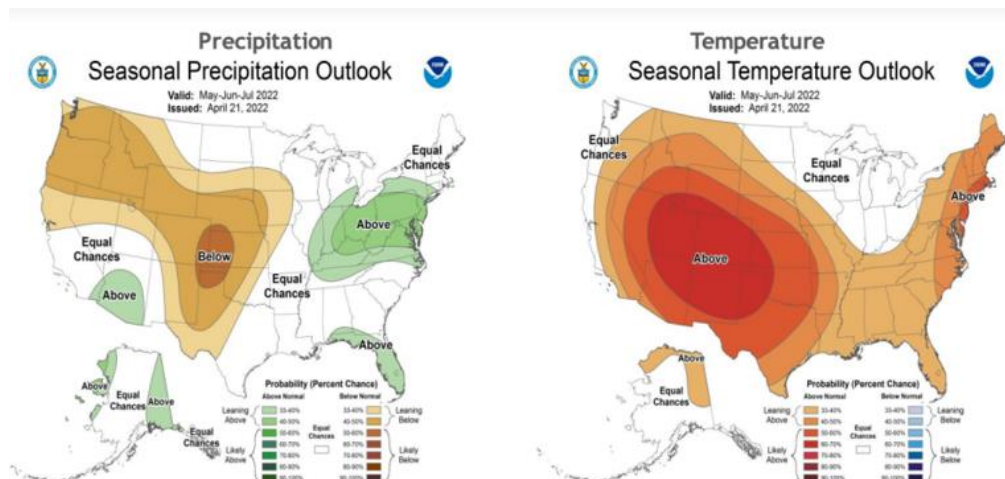
La Nina conditions are favored to continue through the summer, according to an updated outlook released this week by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. There's a 59% chance that La Niña will stick around through August, and the odds are about even that it will continue past August into the fall.

La Niña – and its opposite, El Niño – are characterized by the temperature of the Pacific Ocean. But they have major impacts on the weather we experience on land.

La Niña typically brings drier conditions to the southern half of the country and more precipitation to pockets of the northern half. Drought conditions often worsen, and that looks to be the case for most of the West this summer. This summer, NOAA is also forecasting above-average rainfall for Florida and for the area surrounding the Ohio Valley, including Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio, Virginia, West Virginia, Pennsylvania and more (see maps below).

La Niña winters are usually warmer in the South and cooler in the Northern states. When it comes to the summer, NOAA is predicting a hot one for just about everyone. The three-month outlook shows warmer weather for all states except the Great Lakes region.

The hottest temperatures are predicted out West, in Utah, Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona.





## Carpenter Bees

Carpenter bees resemble bumble bees, but the upper surface of their abdomen is bare and shiny black. Bumble bees have a hairy abdomen with at least some yellow markings. Carpenter bees tunnel into wood to lay their eggs. Male carpenter bees are quite aggressive, often dive-bombing people who are near the nests. In this case, it is all show, because the males lack stingers. Female carpenter bees (they are somewhat larger ) can sting, but this usually occurs only when they are provoked or handled. I wouldn't recommend either.

Bare, unpainted, or weathered softwoods are preferred, such as redwood, or pine. Common nesting sites include eaves, window trim, fascia boards, siding, wooden shakes, decks, and outdoor furniture. Carpenter bees overwinter as adults in wood within abandoned nest tunnels. They emerge in the spring. After mating, the fertilized females excavate tunnels in wood and lay their eggs. The female provides a ball of pollen for the larvae. The larvae pupate and emerge as adults in late summer. The entrance hole and tunnels are perfectly round and about the diameter of your finger. Coarse sawdust will often be present under the entry hole.

While bees are beneficial, carpenter bees can do extensive damage to structures if left alone. The most environmentally-friendly method to deal with carpenter bees is simply to prevent or discourage them from making nests at your house. Paint all exposed wood surfaces, especially those which have a history of being attacked. Wood stains and preservatives can help, but don't work as well as painting.

The conventional treatment for carpenter bee control is to blow Sevin dust into existing tunnels or spray an aerosol wasp control directly into the holes. In the past , I used a turkey baster or collapsible ketchup container to apply the Sevin, which is very toxic to bees and wasps. Treatment is best performed at night when the bees are less active, or while wearing protective clothing. Remember, the lady of the house may be cranky.

In recent years, I have sprayed a wasp control containing mint oil into and around the holes. This organic control helps reduce the carpenter bee population.

After a few days when one no longer sees any activity, one can plug the entrance hole with a piece of wooden dowel coated with carpenter's glue, or wood putty. This will protect against future utilization of the old nesting tunnels and reduce the chances of wood decay. By late spring, carpenter bee activity diminishes. I need some repairs in and around the house. Maybe the bees can get busy with those repairs.



Speaking of bees and wasps, I have noticed an unusual early emergence of yellowjacket wasps in my backyard. They are already attracted to the hummingbird feeder and the oriole jelly. Normally in wet years, the overwintering queen hiding in debris can die – but it seems as if that did not happen. This does not bode well for later on, as yellow jackets can build huge nests in the ground or in soffits or porch overhangs and become a real danger to humans. They especially like outdoor events with food and sometimes can infiltrate soda cans with disastrous results. If you notice a nest in the ground or eaves, eliminate these nests early on to prevent major issues later. Carefully dust Sevin in and around the entry holes – the mint oil may be effective for small nests. Remember yellow jackets can sting repeatably which is why they are so dangerous. Ohioline has good info about yellowjackets.

<https://ohioline.osu.edu/factsheet/HYG-2075-11>.

# Pesticide Residues on Fruits and Veggies Eat This, Not That!

Every year, the non-profit group Environmental Working Group (EWG) showed more than 70% of non-organic fresh produce sold in the U.S. contains residues of pesticides. And according to EWG, some fruits and vegetables are more pesticide-ridden than others—so much so that the group publishes a list of produce that contains the highest concentration of pesticides every year.

The Dirty Dozen, as the group calls it, are the fruits and veggies that are most contaminated with these chemicals. On the flip side, the group also named the produce with the lowest levels of contamination on its Clean Fifteen list. Since 2004, EWG has used the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) test data to rank 46 foods. The research is based on the latest data collected from almost 45,000 samples of produce tested by the USDA and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

A single sample of kale, collard, and mustard greens had up to 21 different pesticides. The pesticide most frequently detected on collards, mustard greens, and kale is the fungicide DCPA—sold under the brand name Dacthal—which is classified by the EPA as a possible human carcinogen and was banned by the EU in 2009. On average, spinach samples had 1.8 times as much pesticide residue by weight as any other crop tested.

The pesticide residues detected on the tested produce were within legal limits and met the government's regulations. However, according to experts at EWG, legal does not mean safe. So how do you best protect yourself from ingesting pesticides unknowingly? The first step is washing your produce properly before eating it. Don't use soap, detergent, or produce wash. Water is the best choice. "People should be washing their produce well—not simply running it lightly under some water sprinkles.

## The Dirty Dozen

Strawberries   Spinach   Kale, mustard, and collard greens   Nectarines   Apples   Grapes  
Bell & hot peppers   Cherries   Peaches   Pears   Celery   Tomatoes

## The "Clean 15"

Avocados   Sweet corn   Pineapple   Onions   Papaya   Sweet peas   Watermelon   Sweet potatoes  
Asparagus   Honeydew melon   Kiwi   Cabbage   Mushrooms   Cantaloupe   Mangoes



## Friends

I recently was contacted by WANE-15 to do a story about lilacs. The reporters there receive Home Horticulture and saw my lilac article in the April issue. They sent a reporter/video person to interview and film. My good friend - Advanced Master Gardener and Diagnostic expert Penny Alles helped demonstrate rejuvenation pruning of a lilac in my backyard. While I worked at Extension, I had the opportunity to serve as a resource to many wonderful folks in radio and television. Gina Glaros and Rob Lydick at Channel 15 were two of my favorites.

For two years I did a bi-weekly television segment at the Extension office gardens with Rob -who was from the state of Maine and had a very dry sense of humor. I especially enjoyed doing interviews with Bruce Haines on PBS TV 39. I loved to do radio, starting with Tim and Lori Persing's extremely popular "Green Thumb" show that progressed to many years with Rick Wolfe on WOWO's House Calls. I answered live questions with Lynn Ford on WBCL radio. I absolutely loved working with Janice Furtner, and Phil Schaul (Mid-day Matters) on PBS radio for many years, and even managed to play music for Julia Meek on a new show at the time called "Meet the Music". I did learn that TV and radio were very transitory. People came and went – but I loved meeting them all.





## Bark Splitting

Splitting and damage to bark can be common with thin - barked species such as soft maples and cherry – especially when they are young. Damage to trees can be caused by many factors such as lightning, improper pruning, disease, animals such as voles, insect damage, sun scald on the bark caused by alternating cold and warm conditions in the winter, and most commonly, improper planting when the root flare of the tree is buried below grade (see picture to right).



It is a common thing for folks to want to "fix" the damage by applying some sort of material over the wound like a band-aid. Other folks use more dramatic methods such as bands of steel or aluminum to "close the wounds. It is very difficult to tell people not to use wound paint, caulk, or gutter or roof sealants to cover areas of damage. Sometimes sealed areas will trap water behind or allow insects to attack unnoticed – delaying the healing process. The tree ultimately will do its best to seal off the wound with thicker callus tissue. Over time, if the wound heals on its own, the wound will "disappear" as the new growth produced each year on the tree completely covers the wound. This can take a long time, but excavating older trees often reveals older healed wounds inside.

It's okay on larger wounds to spray the wound with a thin lacquer/clear sealant to reduce water loss the first year or so. It is also a good idea to use an insecticide periodically to keep insects away from the wound.

If the damage is a buried root flare issue (this usually appears as cracks and damage from ground level up) - then the tree will never heal itself until the flare is exposed so it is above grade. I have discussed how to do this ad nauseum in past issues, but if you need to review, email me and I can send you a copy my once very popular (before it was wiped from the Extension office publication list) ACH publication Root Flares and Volcano Mulching.



## A Loser from Colorado

Well, this could explain many things, but in this case, I am discussing Colorado Blue spruce – native to the Colorado Rockies, but a loser of a tree here in northern Indiana. Why? Our climate and soils here in Indiana are not the same as the crisp cool mountain air of Colorado where the tree grows on mountain slopes with excellent drainage. This puts stress on the poor Colorado Blue Spruce grown in Indiana, and many problems begin to appear as the tree becomes older. Boomer seniors experience this as they become older- some realizing that

lives spent obsessing over work in high-pressure sometimes toxic workplaces can be detrimental to one's health later on.....as it is more important to focus on quality of life rather than quantity of work that no micromanager is ever going to appreciate ----blah blah ...

Anyway, blue spruce in our area experience two major disease issues that make it the number one tree we received questions about at the Extension office. **Cytospora Canker** (this is an older name for this fungal disease still used widely in the trades) affects older or even stressed younger blue spruce and is usually fatal. The disease first appears as whitish areas of bleeding sap on the tree – usually near where branches attach to the tree. Over time the cankers (diseased areas of the tree) become more numerous. Over time, entire branches begin to die with accompanying needle browning and death. There is no real “cure” for this disease. Some tree experts will attempt to spray the trees with very expensive fungicides and then deep root fertilize the trees (also expensive) to try and delay the inevitable. This all takes time, and the trees suffer a long painful death. This is particularly distressing to a single senior on a fixed income with a couple of huge dying spruce trees. Even removing the large trees will cost mucho denaro.



Needle cast is not quite as serious a disease as Cytospora canker, but over time can severely weaken the tree- making it more susceptible to other issues. This is a strange fungal disease because the symptoms of the disease (dying needles with a purplish cast) only appear on growth produced the previous year. So here is what happens: This year, the spruce begins to grow new needles from the tips of branches, and everything looks hunky dory. Suddenly last year's needles begin to turn purple, then brown, and eventually fall off the tree. The result over time is a Colorado Spruce with no needles on the interior of the tree. It's going bald- as many seniors do-unless you are a younger professional shaving their heads to look sometimes smarter than they really are. I call it the Dr. Phil or Dr. Wayne Dyer (I'm Ok, You're Ok) syndrome. Even though it is natural for spruce to lose interior needles over time due to a lack of sunlight, losing more recent needles weakens the trees because the needles are the only way for the tree to produce sugar from photosynthesis for energy to use for all the processes to keep a tree healthy. When spruce trees lose needles – they are gone forever – they don't grow back. Fungicide sprays can reverse the damage done, but again, in the real world many folks can't afford the yearly sprays.



Weakened spruce trees under stress also become more susceptible to spider mite damage during hot dry spells during the summer. Mites are more related to spiders and crabs, so they are not considered true insects. It doesn't matter because these tiny creatures can multiply dramatically and do tremendous damage. If you notice extensive browning and death of needles during the summer, test for mites by placing a white piece of paper under some suspicious needles. Tap the needles over the paper. If you see tiny bits of what looks like dust move about on the paper, then you

probably have mites. One can also look at the needles with a hand lens or dissecting scope. The mites are tiny and fast and creepy to observe.



Certified arborists have the proper growth regulator materials to mess up the life cycle of the mites in an environmentally-friendly way. There is no way an individual can effectively spray for mites on a large spruce tree without inundating themselves with insecticide.

The real solution to these issues - don't plant Colorado Blue in our area. It's a loser. Plant Black Hills or Norway spruce instead. They have fewer issues though they don't have the color or form of our loser friend from Colorado.



## Once Again Birds.....

Most birds are protected species that cannot be messed with – regardless of if you might think they are annoying. The lovesick robin who constantly pecked the windows of my home last year was a classic example. Even though I considered attack drones and rocket launchers to remove the pest, one cannot “harvest” a protected bird legally. The robin tried to resume his behavior this spring, but covering the window seemed to do the trick this year so the bird couldn't see his reflection in the window and think he had just met a bird version of Marilyn Monroe. The following species of birds can be taken without a permit if the birds are committing or about to commit depredations upon ornamental or shade trees, agricultural crops, livestock, or wildlife, or are concentrated in numbers and in a manner that constitutes a health hazard or nuisance . Be sure to check local ordinances prior to using pyrotechnics or firearms. This appears not to be an issue two months before or after the Fourth of July.

Brewer's Blackbirds - Red-winged Blackbirds (really?) - Brown-headed Cowbirds - Crows - Common Grackles

**The following birds can be taken without a permit at any time:** Monk parakeets (Aww.) - Rock (feral) pigeons - House sparrows - European starlings

**Ricky's Comments:** Honestly, most to the time, I think it is best to just let birds be and use steps simply to exclude them – unless they commit unspeakable depredations upon the landscape.

***Depredation: (an act causing) damage or destruction) example:*** Every year, another few inches are lost from the village green as a result of the depredations of traffic and deliveries to supermarkets. From the Hansard archive



**Orioles are Back!** My first visit by an Oriole couple was on May 1, along with my first hummingbird sighting! Other folks have reported similar sightings and timing on Facebook.

Robin parents built a nest near my pergola and 4 new chicks flew off into the wild blue yonder.

The birds are a welcome relief from the incredibly drab and cool spring which has not showcased spring flowering shrubs and trees in the slightest. When we experience a cool and wet spring – flowering is delayed, condensed, and slowed. Copious days of precipitation with few sunny days make for drab colors – kinda like a dirty mop or bedraggled wet dog standing in a corner. You get the drift...

# Broccoli

*Some material compiled from The Spruce*

As far as vegetables are concerned, people either love it or hate broccoli, but its history as a preferred source of food and nutrition has existed since the Roman Empire.

Like the artichoke, broccoli is essentially a large edible flower. The stalks and flower florets are eaten both raw and cooked and have a flavor reminiscent of cabbage, though broccoli is also related to kale, cauliflower, and Brussels sprouts



Broccoli, botanically known as *Brassica oleracea italica*, is native to the Mediterranean. It was created from a cabbage relative by the Etruscans—an ancient Italian civilization who lived in what is now Tuscany—who were considered to be horticultural geniuses. The name broccoli is derived from the Italian word *broccolo*, which means "the flowering crest of a cabbage," and the Latin *brachium* meaning arm, branch, or shoot.

Broccoli has been considered a very valuable food by the Italians since the Roman Empire. Introduced in England in the mid-18th century, broccoli was referred to as "Italian asparagus." There are records of Thomas Jefferson, who was an avid gardener, experimenting with broccoli seeds brought over from Italy in the late 1700s, but although commercial cultivation of broccoli dates back to the 1500s, it did not become a popular foodstuff in the United States until Southern Italian immigrants brought it over from Europe in the early 1920s.

The large head and thick stalk broccoli we are most familiar with is Calabrese broccoli - named after Calabria, Italy. Even though it is available in stores year-round, it is a cold-weather crop. There is another variety that features several thin stalks and heads called sprouting broccoli, and you may also come across Romanesco broccoli, which is tightly packed in a cone shape and is bright green in color.

If you like broccoli, you may want to try broccolini, also called baby broccoli, which is a cross between broccoli and kale, or you might find broccoflower, a cross between broccoli and cauliflower, an appealing snack if you're a fan of both of these flowering vegetables.



No matter which variety you get, broccoli is rich in calcium and has antioxidant properties which help prevent some forms of cancer. The same sulfur odor that can cause gas from over-cooked broccoli also has beneficial antiviral and antibiotic properties.

Broccoli was born through entire decades of selective breeding of wild cabbage by common folks such as ourselves - just a long time ago. Wild cabbage is native to the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts of Europe (picture to left).

Extended breeding of this plant has led to the occurrence of several different varieties such as: Cabbage - Brussels Sprouts- Cauliflower – Kale – Collard - Kohlrabi

**Growing Broccoli** – Broccoli prefers a location with well-drained, fertile soil with a pH of 6.0 to 6.5 and at least six hours of sun. Well, just about every vegetable prefers those conditions, but that is what experts from other areas say to avoid discussing the crappy soils we have in our area. Avoid wet soggy areas. Broccoli also does well in raised beds or larger containers.

Broccoli can be direct seeded or planted from transplants. It is most ideal to transplant in the spring to avoid the extreme summer heat and can be direct seeded or transplanted in the fall. I prefer using transplants. Broccoli grows best where air temperatures range between 60° and 75°F. Broccoli is frost-hardy and can tolerate temperatures as low as 25°F.

Transplants will need to acclimate to the outdoor environment before planting directly into the ground. One week prior to planting, place transplants outdoors in a safe location for a few hours. Each day, gradually increase the amount of time the transplants spend outdoors.

Plant broccoli 18 to 24 inches apart in rows that are spaced 36 inches apart. Two to three weeks after transplanting, apply a side dress of nitrogen fertilizer or compost. Leggy transplants or transplants with crooked stems can be planted up to their first leaves so that they will not grow top-heavy. Good companion plants for broccoli are beets, celery, herbs, onions, potatoes. Avoid planting broccoli near pole beans, strawberries, or tomatoes. High temperatures and increased day length can cause broccoli plants to bolt. Bolting refers to the premature seed or flower stalk production before harvest of the vegetable that typically renders the crop unusable. Broccoli has a shallow root system, so be cautious when cultivating ground near plants. Consider mulching around plants for weed control

The most common insect pests for broccoli plants are the caterpillars of cabbage looper, imported cabbage worm and diamondback moth larvae (preceded by small yellow and white moths). These insects also can cause damage to other crops, such as cabbage and cauliflower. Control these pests by handpicking them off of plants or by spraying or dusting with *Bacillus thuringiensis*.



To harvest broccoli, cut the central stem at least 6 inches below the fully developed head before it starts to separate and flowers open. Harvesting heads at an early stage will allow for a better tasting crop. Certain varieties will produce additional smaller heads from the side shoots after the main head has been cut. These smaller heads can be harvested throughout the growing season. Broccoli can be stored in loose plastic bags in a refrigerator for three to five days. An easy, efficient way to preserve your broccoli for later use is to freeze it. Separate the heads into bite-size pieces or a size that works best for your family's needs. Blanch for three minutes, cool and place into freezer bags.

## Heirloom Broccoli

- **Waltham 29 Broccoli**
- A compact variety developed by the University of Massachusetts in the early 1950s, Waltham 29 produces tight, crisp heads with bright, sweet flavor. Delicious roasted, grilled, blanched, and sautéed!
- **Di Ciccio Broccoli**
- A fast-growing Italian heirloom that produces a smaller central head and lots of tender side shoots. Emerald green with a slightly sweet flavor.
- **Calabrese Broccoli**
- Italian immigrants brought this extremely popular variety to America in the late 1800s. Calabrese produces a tightly packed head up to 7-8" in diameter. After the head is harvested, collect side shoots from ongoing harvest until frost. Crisp, sweet, and delicious.
- **Early Purple Sprouting Broccoli**
- 60 Days. This buttery soft, nutty-flavored broccoli from the U.K. is ideal for mild coastal or protected climates and produces lots of purple broccoli sprouts in the spring. Listed in John Mason's seed catalog in 1793.



# Cows and Skittles

condensed from Newsweek



An Iowa farmer called Dairy Farmer Dan has shared the exact reason cows across America are fed Skittles—and to say the internet is shocked is an understatement. Actually, I think cows dancing in unison to Hip-Hop music on Tik Tock would be more “shocking”

It might sound like a surprising food choice, but many farmers up and down the country choose to feed their cows skittles, explained Dan. Cows snacking on candy bags might come to mind, but that's far from the reality of it all. "What a cow eats every day is called a totally mixed ration," explained Dan.

Farmers make the ration by mixing various food, grains, and nutrients together to make every bite identical. "So, the cow gets the exact same bite, every single hour of every single day because cows love consistency," he said. The ration is a "specially formulated, regularly balanced diet," which leads to the use of Skittles. Farmers add Skittles to the mix as a sugar and energy source for the cows.

"We're not force feeding cows bags and bags of candy on end," explained Dan. "We're not doing that to try and trick the cow into eating more of this or making it more addictive—we're putting a little bit of sugar into their diet, because a little bit of sugar in their diet is a good thing." "Sure it is “

In 2017, when CNN broke a story of a road in Wisconsin, mysteriously littered with hundreds of thousands of red Skittles. Locals were bewildered by the mess, but it was soon figured out to have fallen off a truck hauling the candy to be used as cattle feed. According to CNN, candy has been used in feed for decades but became increasingly popular in 2021, when corn prices skyrocketed, meaning farmers sought out cheaper alternatives.

Unsurprisingly, news of animals eating candy left people unsure on the practice, but experts remain adamant that all is good when it comes to cows and candy. "It's a way to get nutrients in these cattle," John Waller, professor of animal nutrition at the University of Tennessee "The alternative would be to put the candy in a landfill somewhere." Well, how about Skittle, Mac-and Cheese, and Spam Delight for our kids? It's a way to get some nutrients into the little rascals.

**Ricky's comments:** Doesn't eating a mixed ration everyday sound exciting? Here's a thought - just have the cows eat grass in an open pasture.

## Gardening in a Wet Year

It appears based on NOAA predictions and my own use of a crystal ball that we will experience a rainy year with “normal” temperatures. “Normal” is NOAA's way of saying “ it could be cold or warm – or hot.

Overly wet years can be a pain, especially for conventional gardeners who might have to wait until June to plant without ending up with a clumpy, cloddy mess of soil. This is one reason I prefer raised beds – because I can brag to fellow gardeners that



my stuff is planted - theirs is not. Ha ha ha ha....Losers!!! ....*throws a garden trowel on the ground like a microphone at a karaoke event.*

Wet years usually mean more disease on vegetables and flowers. I found while I was working for Extension – that folks generally watered their plants as much or more in wet years. This baffling behavior is explained by the fact humans are creatures of habit – water on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, even though the ground is saturated with water. We can't help ourselves.... All the plants really need is about an ½ inch to an inch of precipitation a week. If we receive about that amount, then please don't water. Digging into the soil near the plants to a depth of 6 inches is the best way to determine if watering is needed. If the soil at that depth is moist, then don't water until the soil at that depth is dry and crumbly.

Anyway, this would be a good time to make sure you have a fungicide on hand. It is a bit more difficult to find organic fungicides that work nowadays. Serenade fungicide (my favorite organic fungicide) is available, but only in larger more expensive quantities meant more for commercial use - it still can be mixed for home garden vegetables – but it is expensive. Actinovate is a fungicide that also works well on root diseases, along with common diseases such as early blight on tomatoes and powdery mildew. Gardeners will see both of those diseases in a month or so. Try not to get caught up on some of the Internet “expert opinions” that talk about spraying milk on vegetables – or using some sort of cedar concoction or other homegrown blends for disease control. So sorry, they don't reliably work – unless you want your garden to smell like putrid milk.



Aphids in particular love the cool wet weather we have experienced. There are many different kinds, and some produce a woolly sticky substance rather than the clear honeydew that many aphids produce. If you observe curling of leaves on any crop this spring – along with sticky honeydew on leaves – look on the undersides of the leaves to spy the cute little insects sucking away on the plant juices.

Aphids have a life cycle where the insect goes from the youngster (nymph) to adult (with wings) without having a larval (caterpillar) stage. This lifestyle means numbers can build up rapidly. In an aphid's case it is extremely rapid because aphid babies are born pregnant as they hatch from egg cases. They in turn bear pregnant females who again....it becomes out of control very quickly. When one looks at aphids under a hand lens or dissecting scope, all parts of the life cycle are usually visible. One observes egg cases, honeydew, some winged adults, and tons of aphid nymphs using their piercing sucking mouthparts to suck on plant sap. They are so content sucking plant sap that they wiggle their behinds as they feed. It really is very cute – in a bizarre sort of way. One sometimes can observe ants placing aphids in strategic locations so they can harvest the sweet honeydew.

High pressure water sprays can help to wash the aphids away. Insecticidal soap, neem, or pyrethrum spray are all organic means of control. The aphids usually disappear during summer heat and drought periods.



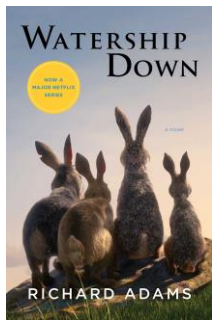
## Peonies and Ants

I really like peonies in certain situations in a landscape. To see peonies lining a garden path or sidewalk is a thing of beauty. The large fragrant flowers are wonderful to use in fresh table arrangements. Many folks find ants on the peony buds in early spring and conclude the ants are

necessary for the peony flowers to open. This is another gardening myth that is simply not true. The ants are simply after the sweet sugary sap in the buds.

In wet years, peonies can develop grey mold (called *botrytis* blight). This is fungal disease that can cause the flower buds not to open. Once again, some gardeners blame a lack of ants on the flower buds as the reason peonies do not flower. Not true. The plant can also develop purplish lesions on the stems and leaves.

The disease can overwinter and reinfect peonies from fungal spores left on leaf debris - one reason why experts encourage gardeners to clean up debris in late fall or very early spring. Organic fungicides - as mentioned previously - can help prevent further progression of this disease.



## Rabbits in a Garden

There is nothing more disheartening than seeing a rabbit in your garden and landscape for the first time in the spring. Gardeners know that if you see a solitary rabbit, there are usually more lurking about.

Rabbits are clever creatures. I recently saw a news feed that showcased a rabbit who had taken up residence with her kits at a large box store garden center. The rabbit was careful to make her nest in the produce section where an enormous supply of food was readily available. Kudos to the rabbit – better at the garden center than occupying my home landscape.

Rabbits can do incredible damage to young shrubs and trees, knowing around the trunks and girdling to connective tissue so that water and food transport is cut off – killing the shrub or tree you spent way too much on via the Internet. Rabbits often just saunter by a newly planted annual or vegetable clipping off the plant at ground level without ever eating the plant. It is outrageous disrespectful behavior.

Every year I try to seal off areas of entry into my backyard. I find that over time the rabbits dig under or around such barriers to reach my plants. It is a constant battle. Repellants, sound devices, plastic owls, or other methods have proven ineffective. Even patrolling dogs and feral cats cannot stop them. I have a feeling that land mines or rocket launchers paired with posters of General Woundwart (from the novel *Watership Down*) would still be ineffective.

What is a gardener to do? I do try to exclude the rabbits and I also put cages around newly planted trees and shrubs. The rabbits have a harder time reaching my taller raised beds. I could try to live trap the rabbits and move them somewhere else, but studies show their survival rate is low, and I ask myself why I would just give my problem to another gardener if they actually managed to survive? Maybe I could just smuggle them to a nearby garden center- just kidding-sort of.



## Hoggles – Demented Cat Logic

**To my caregiver:** *Just so you know, I have undergone deep hypnosis as a part of my weekly therapy visits in an attempt to resolve my deep anger and acting out issues. In those sessions we discovered that I am the reincarnated version of the cat from the novel Watership Down...Probably not a great idea to bring a pet rabbit home....*



# Spittlebugs

This is the time of the year when the beloved spittlebug appears in landscapes. One knows whether spittlebugs are present when one notices globs of foamy spit on various plants such as: Strawberries, Eastern White pine, turfgrass clumps, and other assorted plants.

What you are observing are nymphs of the meadow spittlebug- which eventually become a creature called a frog hopper. These little cuties have enlarged hind legs for jumping. They are similar to leafhoppers but are fatter.

The nymphs inside the spittle masses have soft, elongated bodies up to 1/4 inch long. They change from orange to yellow to green as they grow and have large red eyes on the sides of their heads.

Nymphs pump bubbles into fluid that is secreted as a foamy substance during feeding. This frothy mass protects spittlebugs from enemies and from drying out. The nymphs mature in five to eight weeks. As adults they move to nearby grassy areas, pastures, or areas with broadleaf weeds. The females return in September and October and lay clusters of eggs in plant debris or in leaves and stems. There is only one generation per year.

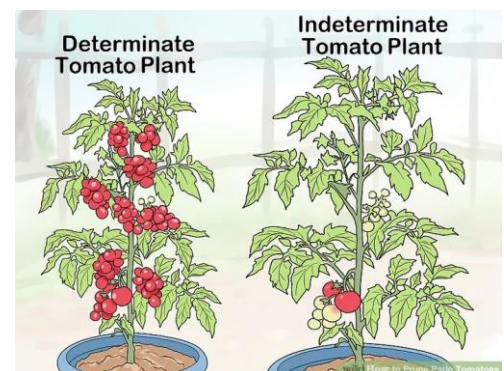
Some folks are alarmed when they observe frothy spit on plants and want to spray something to get rid of them. Pesticides are not effective against spittlebugs as the nymphs are protected inside their spittle masses from any pesticide sprays.

They do very little if any damage, so it really is best to walk away and concentrate on more important things – like observing cow families dance on TikTok.



## A Philosophical Way to Prune Tomatoes Some info compiled from WIKI How and The Spruce

The tomato is native to western South America and Central America. In 1519, Cortez discovered tomatoes growing in Montezuma's gardens and brought seeds back to Europe where they were planted as ornamental curiosities - but not eaten – because the plant was thought to be poisonous. In the U.S. it wasn't until Colonel Robert Gibbon Johnson ate a basket of tomatoes on the steps of a local courthouse and did not die in front of a crowd collected to watch him foam at the mouth, twitch, and generally carry on until he finally expired. When he didn't, tomatoes were redeemed and were gradually accepted as food, though preferably in a highly processed form, after extended exposure to heat, vinegar, and spices. Tomato ketchup was popular long before salad tomatoes were



I am assuming that many gardeners have planted their tomatoes. I waited to plant mine this year as I grew weary of protecting my plants from last season's numerous freezes and frosts. Pruning tomato plants can help reduce disease and produce better quality fruit as the plant is more balanced in the leaf/fruit ratio to be more efficient.

There are two main varieties of tomato plants: determinate and indeterminate (see above). Determinate tomato plants will grow in a small bush and are generally well suited to planting in a container. Since all the fruit are produced and ripen at roughly the same time, determinate varieties are good choices for canners.

Indeterminate tomato plants will grow larger than determinate tomatoes. Their growth and fruit production are not “determined” so they produce fruit all season. It is the **Forest Gump** philosophy. This quote from the movie is treasured by tomatoes everywhere in the world *“I don’t know if we each have a destiny, or if we’re all just floatin’ around accidental-like on a breeze. But I, I think maybe it’s both.”* –...wipes tears from face.....

Determinate tomato plants will likely not need to be pruned except for maybe removing lower leaves and suckers. Indeterminate tomatoes will usually require a large cage or tall wooden stake to grow properly and can benefit from pruning.



It can be helpful to begin pruning your tomato plant from the bottom and working your way up. This will allow you to keep track of your progress and you'll be able to clearly see what needs to be removed as you work. Most of the pruning will take place at the bottom of the plant. Many stems on the lower portion of the plant will not yield fruit. This is the **Alice in Wonderland** philosophy of pruning. As one pinches or clips off bottom leaves, shout “OFF

WITH THEIR HEADS! When the police arrive after a frantic call from a neighbor, explain the proper methods of pruning tomatoes as they handcuff and haul you away...

Don't overdo the pruning. It's important that you leave enough leaves and stems for the plant to function properly. Cutting away too much of the plant can cause it to grow slowly or possibly die. Removing too many leaves can expose the fruit to the sun and ruin the tomatoes. Don't remove more than 1/3 of the total plant while pruning.



Remove suckers as they appear. Suckers are shoots that grow in the leaf axil of the plant – where the main stems and a leaf stem already occur. They do not produce fruit, so they are worthless. This is the **Wall Street** philosophy of pruning. As Gordon Gekko said in the movie “The public's out there throwing darts at a board, sport. I don't throw darts at a board – I bet on sure things.”

Consider cutting off the terminal or top leaf/bud of the plants where the growth is more upwards instead of outwards. If your tomato plant has grown too high, you may consider pruning the topmost growth stems. This will prevent the plant from growing upwards, redirecting growth outwards to the tomatoes themselves. This is the **Jack and the Beanstalk** philosophy - Cut the top off before the giant comes down....



Pruning tomatoes is an ongoing process. Remove lower leaves and suckers as the plant develops. Don't top the terminal growth too early. Read books on philosophy and self-help while watching your garden grow. In the early morning proclaim to your tomato plants as per the **Jerry Maguire** philosophy of growing tomatoes “You had me at hello”

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