

Gardeners Question Time
Questions and Answers 29th November 2023

1) Please will the panel let me know how to and when to prune a very spindly Fig tree, and how to encourage it to fruit well.

Prune twice a year, once in early spring and once in summer to trim back growth. Figs are best planted against a sunny wall with their roots constricted by a pot or paving stones. Root pruning is one way of jolting it into fruiting more. There was discussion about removing unripe fruit from figs in the autumn. In our climate the fruit usually takes 2 summers to ripen, so need to keep some from the previous year, but should it be the larger ones which will be prone to dropping off in a frost or the pea sized ones? Opinions differed.

2) I don't have a garden, so I try to grow hyacinths indoors, but I never succeed. I get bulbs from Plants Galore in October and pot them up in compost with their noses peeping out. I put them in a cool dark spot under the stairwell with a note to the cleaner "Please let sleeping bulbs lie." But by January they haven't even put their heads above the parapet. Am I planting the wrong bulbs, or am I planting bulbs incorrectly?

Probably the wrong bulbs as you need to get prepared hyacinth bulbs which have been chilled by the nursery so tricked into thinking that autumn is spring, so they flower at Christmas time. Also it takes 12-14 weeks to come into flower, so buy them at end of September for Christmas flowering and they need a bit of warmth to start them off.

3) These don't look like the Brown Turkey figs they were labelled as! What has gone wrong?



Obviously, they got mislabeled at the garden centre or nursery.

Keep your receipts for plants for a year and for 6 years for hardy shrubs as garden centres which are members of the GCA guarantee them for 6 years. St Bridget's is not a member of the GCA but does offer guarantees for the plants its supplies.

4) Orchid: obviously needs a new pot but am nervous about moving it. Also its growth has been poor for several years with just one white flower if I am lucky. It used to flower around November and go on through to February/March but that no longer seems to be its chosen blooming time. Any suggestions please?



Orchids like to be pot bound, only repot if they start to rise out of the pot. Feed every 10 days or so with orchid feed when there is any sign of growth, eg new leaf or flower stalk.

5) I would be grateful for some rules of thumb that I can use to work out for myself when and how to prune certain types of plants.

I am aware of various 'rules' such as:

- Some deciduous plants should be pruned immediately after flowering. Others you wait until they are dormant in mid/late winter, others you wait until early Spring!
- Some you prune when the sap is or is not rising!
- Some you cut right down to the ground eg fuchsia, others you just cut back the stems that have flowered.
- Blackcurrants are pruned at a different time from gooseberries.

Here's hoping you can help me get rid of my various scrappy notes, books and save me frequent visits to websites?!

Use the RHS website or its Guide to Pruning and Training is the bible, but a fairly good rule of thumb is to prune after flowering.

6) For the last 3 years I have been mulching the growing areas on my allotment instead of digging. The mulch comes from my compost bin which is a wire cage of about a cubic metre in volume and insulated with 10cm foam insulation on 3 sides and the top, but open to the elements. The waste vegetation is mainly cut grass and allotment weeds with doses of shredded paper and cardboard. The temperature of the bin during the summer gets upto 60oC but can be very moist due to rain getting in. The heap is emptied to under cover around June and spread on the growing areas during the winter.

If I don't keep on top of the weeding, my plot produces a fine crop of weeds!

My question is: where do they come from? Is it:

- a) From the mulch which, although composted hot, still contains viable seeds?
- b) From new seeds in the current year growing on the mulch?
- c) Already in the soil and growing through the mulch?

Seeds are generally very resilient and ephemeral weeds are a particular problem - they are weeds which can go through several life cycles in one year, such as chickweed, hairy bittercress,

groundsel. Regular hoeing is the answer and has the benefit of feeding the organic matter of the weeds straight back into the soil. But preparing and using your own compost is to be highly recommended. If you can turn the heap regularly then so much the better as seeds are more likely to have a spell in the centre of the heap where they heat is highest and most likely to kill them, and it keeps the heap aerated and better for the bacteria which break it down. If deep rooted perennials are a problem, then a hori hori (Japanese weeding knife) is an effective tool.

7) I would like to know:- what is the life cycle of the Box Tree Moth Caterpillar, so that I am ready for it, if and when it arrives in my garden next year - and are there any alternatives to either trying to pick off 100's of caterpillars or else spraying them? I have invested 25 years of my time and affection in my 5 box shrubs and I don't want to give up on them.

There are some sprays which are effective and a particularly good one called Topbuxus is going through UK registration at the moment. However other remedies are to be vigilant from April onwards, a quick brush across the leaves of your box will send the moths up into the air and watch out for the caterpillars too. It would seem that birds are starting to latch on the box tree moth caterpillars as a great food source, so in time nature will balance things out.

8) In some of my pot plants I find maggots eating roots - what are they and how do I deal with them?

This is the dreaded vine weevil, if you can knock them out of the pot onto a pot feeder then birds will love to eat them. However, if you have a lot of pots it is probably worth buying nematodes which are very effective predators of the vine weevil grubs. The first sign of vine weevil attack is often the complete collapse of the plant which does not respond to watering.

Look out for the distinctive half-moon nibbles out of the leaves of pot plant, which are the trade mark of the mature weevil.

9) I have a Kerria which is on the North West corner of the house, trained in a tall column. This year I pruned it in early November as usual. but noted a lot more die back than usual and some black patches on the stems. I'm not sure whether it is diseased or whether the weather (too dry in Spring / too wet in Summer) has upset it. There are still some healthy stems left, but the die back is continuing.
Any ideas?

The variable and unusual weather patterns of recent years have put some plants under stress and left them vulnerable to disease. The affected stems should be cut out and not composted. The feed in the spring if new shoots appear, but it may well be terminal. If you get new shoots, then separate some of them and replant in a new area.

OTHER QUESTIONS FROM THE AUDIENCE

When do you prune Tamarisk – wait until early spring. Tamarisk is a great plant.

Small holes in perpetual spinach – what do I do? Cover newly planted spinach with very fine mesh or fleece to stop flea beetles.

Tips for growing garlic? Plant now to harvest in June, 8ins apart, wide rows so you can hoe without damaging leaves or stem. Nip off flowers (can be cooked). Can use garlic from the grocer or buy from seed merchant, which will give you larger cloves. Soft neck garlic keeps well, hard neck garlic tastes better but doesn't store.

Small reasonably fast growing trees please:-

Flowering cherries

Acer Palmatum (a bit slow growing)

Nyssa sinensis

Pittisporum

Eucryphia

Hoheria

Styrax

or consider some large shrubs:-

Broom

Cotoneaster Franchetti or other cotoneaster varieties

Wisteria grown up a pole

Hellebores not thriving- need moist but well drained situation. Can be prone to hellebore wilt. Cut off old leaves as soon as the new ones start to appear, to reduce chance of wilt.

Questions for the audience

a) The strangest or most unexpected this you have seen in your garden this year

Iris flowering now

b) How have you got on with peat free compost?

Not well in many cases. Caradoc explained that the problem is the supply of raw materials to go into the new mixes. Manufacturers can't source what they need and are trialling all sorts of different recipes. It will take several years for the situation to improve. Even the best peat free brand had a poor year last year.

Best thing is to make your own. Keep the heaps moist but airy for best results. Leaf mould generally takes 2 years to rot down before usable.