

Garden Myths and the Truth
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From time to time, folks make pronouncements about their gardens and nature. Here are some myths heard year after year.

Many acorns mean either a cold winter, a cold and wet winter, or an early winter.

The truth is acorn production varies from year to year according to many factors including the species of oak, the amount of rainfall, fluctuations in the climate, and the prevalence of pests and disease. Oaks produce acorns every three to five years in an amount sufficient for animals to eat and ensure adequate tree replacement. Squirrels gathering huge stores of acorns in any given year is not a predictor of a cold and snowy winter either.

If fertilizer is good, twice as much is even better.

No, too much fertilizer can create high soluble-salt levels that can burn the roots and lead to plant decline.

Add unlimited coffee grounds and/ or grass clippings to the compost pile.

Wrong. Coffee grounds include the pulp, peel, hulls, husks, and effluent of the coffee bean. Coffee grounds should make up no more than 15-20% of the total compost volume. The grounds are a good source of nitrogen, but they are acidic. Too much acid prevents the compost heap from heating up enough to decompose.

Also limit the amount of grass clippings in the compost pile. A compost pile needs to have the right mix of carbon and nitrogen. The ration should be 30 parts carbon to 1 part nitrogen by weight. The easiest way to achieve this is to aim for equal amounts of green and brown materials. Grass clippings qualify as green material and have a carbon to nitrogen ratio of 19:1. Thus too high a volume of greens, like an overwhelming and unbalanced number of grass clippings, create a moisture and air barrier in the compost pile. This condition promotes the growth of mold and slows down decomposition.

Coffee grounds make a good acid mulch.

Yes, but in limited amounts. Apply coffee grounds as mulch in a layer no thicker than ½ inch. Otherwise, the grounds easily become compacted to create a barrier for air and moisture.

Native plants do not require water.

Wrong. They do require water initially and especially in the first year after planting so the roots work their way deep into the soil. After that, they are able to thrive in the local climate and produce food and shelter for native animal species.

Drought tolerant is the same as drought resistant.

No. Drought tolerant plants have adapted over time to tolerate life with little or no water. Drought resistant plants are designed by nature to require very little water, like the cactus.

It is OK to water the lawn at any time.

No. Water the lawn in the early morning so the grass blades can dry out during the day and not be a cool and wet place for fungus to thrive. There will be less loss of water to evaporation if water is applied in the morning as opposed to later in the day when the sun is overhead.

Grass clippings left on the lawn will cause thatch.

No. Thatch is mostly a layer of grass stems and roots, living and dead organic matter that has settled on the grass or ground. Excessive thatch (over 1/2 inch thick) creates a favorable environment for pests and disease and an unfavorable growing environment for grass roots. Short clippings left on the lawn after mowing are not the cause of thatch buildup. Clippings are very high in water content and breakdown rapidly. Excessive watering and fertilizing have more to do with the build up of thatch because they cause the lawn to grow very rapidly, inhibiting the decomposition of organic matter at ground level. Lawns should be mowed on a regular basis. No more than one-third of the leaf blade should be cut off at each mowing.

Water on plant leaves in full sun will cause the leaves to burn.

No. To be sure, it is better to water in the morning, but water left on the leaves does not burn the leaves. Burn marks may be a sign of fungus or bacteria, or an indication that the plant roots have absorbed a substance that manifests itself on the plant leaf, or a sign that the plant is not getting enough water.

The addition of supplements to the soil will change soil texture.

No, soil texture cannot be changed. However, soil structure can be. Soil texture is the percentage of sand, silt and clay in the soil and determines the tilth or the fitness of the soil as a medium, and its holding capacity for nutrients and water. Adding sand to clay, will not loosen the clay soil, but will make it cement-like. On the other hand, soil structure is the aggregation of soil particles with organic matter. Structure is the way in which particles and aggregates are arranged. Structure affects moisture availability to plants through water movement, fertility, aeration, and porosity. Soil structure can be changed and improved with the addition of organic matter such as humus, earthworm castings and compost. Thus the nutrient quality of soil can be improved, but not its texture. Adding excessive amounts of sand to clay, will result in a sandy soil problem.

Braiding spent bulb leaves is a fashionable thing to do until the leaves die.

No. Knotting or braiding restricts photosynthesis. The part of the leaf that is not exposed to the sun is unable to transform sunlight energy into stored chemical energy, which allows the bulb to produce new leaves and flowers in the next season.

Rocks in the bottom of flower pots are good for drainage.

No. In fact, the opposite is true. Rocks in the bottom of pots can block and restrict water drainage by reducing the size of the drainage hole. It is best not to put anything on top of the drainage hole.

Treat cut wood to keep out disease and bugs and help the wood heal.

Tree bark has a natural defense mechanism. When the bark of a tree is injured it naturally calluses over and compartmentalizes the wound to prevent decay, insects, fungi, and microorganisms from attacking the tree. Tree bark neither ‘heals’ nor regenerates. The tree isolates the wound through the formation of suberized and lignified wood that physically and chemically repels invasion or infection. Therefore, dressing the wound only decreases the effectiveness of the tree’s own recovery process. Healthy trees are naturally resistant to insect attack.

Tomorrow, February 12, 2011, Master Gardeners will be presenting a class on “Weather and Climate for Foothill Gardens” at 9 a.m. The class is offered at no charge and will be held in the Bethell-Delfino Agriculture Building at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville.

Learn more about gardening in the foothills at the Master Gardener 2nd Annual Spring Plant Sale. Presentations on popular gardening topics will provide all sort of tips and hints. In addition, there will be a great selection of annuals, vegetables and perennials. The sale will be held on Saturday, April 16th in the parking lot of the Veterans Memorial Building, 130 Placerville Dr. in Placerville and benefits Master Gardener community outreach programs.

The Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. The office is located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. Walk-ins are welcome. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ceeldorado.ucdavis.edu/Master_Gardener/.