

## Plant Lover's Almanac

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To date this is a mild, mild summer, with a touch of dryness coming only of late, resulting now in some browning of lawns and the first signs of early fall leaf color on trees and shrubs, which is often a sign of plant stress. Speaking of the plant version of stress, I frequently talk of “What Makes Our Good Plants Go Bad” including recently at Summer of 2015 programs at the Northwest Ohio Field Day in Toledo and the Woody Plant Symposium at the Scott Arboretum at Swarthmore College near Philadelphia.

Before we dig into the dark side of plant health though, I want to suggest a horticultural tour for all those who are able: go to the Philadelphia area, to Longwood Gardens, to the Morris Arboretum of the University of Pennsylvania, to Chanticleer Gardens, to Tyler Arboretum. All of these *almost* rival the wonders of northeast Ohio, but if you have a chance to visit Scott Arboretum, say in late October, check out their ‘Saratoga’ ginkgo espalier.

Yes, a ginkgo espalier! It should be quite a sight in fall, splayed against the wall, when ginkgo leaves turn a wonderful golden hue, worth a very long hike or bike trip (about 409 miles) or for most of us, a plane, train, or automobile trip. The learned horticulturist Michael Dirr once wrote of the katsuratrees of Regis College in Massachusetts: “...the planting at Regis consists of numerous seedling trees lining either side of a long semicircular drive and in the fall it is absolutely unbelievable; worth first class airfare to see the spectacle.” I think this may be the ginkgo version of this impulse. I certainly plan to so indulge one of these autumns.

But, back to the bad. What are a few tips for helping your plants to not go to *that other place*. And, remember, to be redundant, this primer is just the beginning.

First, remember that probably the worst cause of good plants gone bad, is in ourselves not our stars. Channel the message of Pogo for your inner plant lover; “We have met the pest and he is us!” Do no harm. Do not plant a tree or shrub above grade, out of the ground where water will wick from the roots, nor bury that root system by planting below grade, forcing the plant into energy-depleting overtime to compensate for lower soil oxygen levels. Mulch moderate: 2-3 inches of organic mulch is best, rather than the mulch madness of mounding. Be selective: no *Taxus* for wet sites, no rhododendrons for alkaline soil, no hostas for hot, direct sun. Prune with a purpose.

Speaking of which - know thy plants: a pine by any other name is not a spruce. Diplodia tip blight and *Cytospora* fungal canker diseases occur on new growth and on the lower portions of pine (*Diplodia*) and spruce (*Cytospora*). Treatment options differ for these diseases, so it is important to know if it is a pine or a spruce. Prune pines as new growth is half-developed in spring – then “peench their little haids off”, breaking those new shoots in half, even manually. This results in a well-rounded pine. Spruces, though, can be pruned far later into the season: do it with pine and the plant will be all out of proportion.

So there are problems if you think of pine and spruce interchangeably. Learn the difference. Here it is: pines have needles in bundles of 2,3, or 5 where needles attach to the twig. Spruces have needles singly attached to the

twig. Simple as that for their ID difference. Of course, there is more to it as you enter Shakespeare's "infinite book of secrecy". For example, white pines have five needles in a bundle, Austrian pines have two needles in a bundle. There is more to the world than pines and spruces: what about firs? Firs, like spruces have needles singly attached to the stem, but fir needles are flat, while spruce needles are square or triangular, easy to discern from touch by removing a few needles. Try it, this is fun. Then there are hemlocks and yews, and *ad infinitum*. But it matters.

Let us close today's primer with one of the short-term pleasures and long-term pitfalls of plant health management. The fact is, that doing one small thing wrong does not necessarily mean a plant keels over and dies. This is comforting: a little too much mulch, though it might hold too much moisture around the trunk, is not a death warrant. Plant a tree an inch too deep and it will not necessarily fall onto your garage in twenty years. Push the envelope with acid-loving pachysandra planted in higher-pH alkaline soil and leaves may only be a little yellower than you would be like. Nevertheless, it all adds up: Shakespeare scribes it again:

"And many strokes, though with a little axe, Hew down and fell the hardest-timbered oak."

As with the lessons of my own type-2 diabetes, optimal (or not) tree health is a lifetime achievement.

Note: By the way, as per my recent challenge, asking for an arbor-version of OSU's "H" in O-H-I-O, we have a leader in the clubhouse, Deb Kramer of Toledo, with her H-bonded maple.

To be continued.