

Plant Lover's Almanac

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This past Monday, I gave a seminar to the Ohio State University Plant Pathology Department, from whom I received a M.S. degree, lo these many years, yes, decades ago. All was very well-organized and students, faculty and staff were beyond pleasant, munching on macarons and lavender shortbreads. Yet, something was amiss. In the announcement of my seminar, I was referred to as Dr. Chatfield. But I am not a Doctor of Philosophy, a PhD, or any other sort of Doctor, but rather am I a Master of Science! An understandable error perhaps, what with my trumptic face-like persona of professorial formality, my evident erudition, and my Einsteinian hair.

Yet. Yet, it got my burgeoning brain cells working (after fifty, males either grow hair cells or brain cells – I chose brain). Perhaps I am a Doctor. Digging in to one of my past shticks, out came for the first time in years – Dr. Treevorkian! Years ago, when faced with the fact that plant lovers were clearly not listening to advice on how to take care of trees, I came up with an alter ego, a Dr. Treevorkian who gave advice on how to kill trees and other plants. Maybe then they would listen – in reverse – or something like that.

So, a few (un)timely Tips from Dr. Treevorkian.

pHooley! This comes from Dr. Treevorkian's "Ten-Step Program for Assisted Herbicide", in which he discounts the importance of knowing your soil pH when planting. In reality pH, which measures your soil alkalinity and acidity is very important in plant selection. Do not plant acid-loving red maples, rhododendrons, pin oaks, white pines, pachysandra and other plants in soil pH that approaches and exceeds 7.

Soil is just a bunch of dirt. This from his "Secrets of the Soil" is part of Dr. T's dissing of soil by giving it the, well, "dirty" pejorative that belies the importance for plant lovers that we should give to the interplay of soil chemistry (things like pH), soil physics (the interplay of the different sizes of the soil particles of sand, silt, and clay), and soil biology. Soil biology is particularly crucial with the organic matter that helps nurture living bacteria, fungi, insects, earthworms and other organisms that result in good soil aggregation (crumbliness) that make for healthy plant roots.

Seen one label, seen 'em all. In Dr. T's "Squirt-Gun Botany" he cites this as well as "If a little is good, then a lot is better". These are downright devilish mis-directions with regard to pesticide use. Pesticide chemical labels, which include such items as fungicides, insecticides, and herbicides are unique to what is inside that container. Not only is each one of these products different, with certain insecticides working just for certain insects, for example, but even the same brand name of a particular product may change ingredients over the years, resulting in different usage recommendations. How can you know? Read each label, carefully.

And do not assume that if you double the recommended dosage the result will be twice as good. Label recommendations are there for a reason and reflect a cost-benefit relationship for the amounts used and for example to environmental costs. In addition, with certain herbicides, increasing the dosage results in lessened effectiveness. Kill the plant tissue too fast and it will not translocate down to the roots to effectively kill the weed.

Death and Taxus: Plant in wet sites. In Dr. T's "Simple Rules of Plant Selection" he recommends that *Taxus* or yew plants be sited in wet, poorly-drained sites. In truth this reeks of an old-fashioned auto industry slur called "planned obsolescence". True, if you follow this recommendation, yew plants will die sooner rather than later and the nursery and landscape industry will have to sell you more plants. But this is not the goal of the green industry: they want your plants to thrive. Yews are particularly sensitive to low-oxygen, poorly-drained soils. In such soils, yew roots metabolize poorly and in addition such wet soils are homes to water-mold microorganisms that act as tiny Dr. Treevorkians of the Soil". Do not encourage them!

Well, there is a lot more from where this came from: missives such as "Salts are the spice of death: Season until well-done" with Dr. T. encouraging over-fertilization and use of road salts near sensitive plants. In Dr.T.-anese this translates into "White pines for the white lines", since white pines planted too close to high speed-limit freeways pleases him, but not us. However, at least for now, or for another decade or two, good riddance to you, Dr. Treevorkian.

Final note: Tomorrow is my birthday. I love the "Lord of the Rings" and, like hobbits, love to give presents on my birthday rather than receive presents. As J.R.R. Tolkien wrote in "The Fellowship of the Ring": "*Hobbits give presents to other people on their own birthday. Not very expensive ones, as a rule, and not so lavishly as on this occasion; [Bilbo's eleventy-first birthday and Frodo's thirty-third birthday] but it was not a bad system. Actually in Hobbiton and Bywater every day in the year was somebody's birthday, so that every hobbit in these parts had a fair chance of at least one present at least once a week.*"

I cannot give a present to all of you, dear readers, but, for the first to answer this riddle, I shall award a most precious prize. The riddle is: How old am I, "*Doing the garden, digging the weeds*". That's it. No more clues. Answer in three weeks.