

Let's Talk Gardening

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The Country Gardener

Happy Birthday to Me!!

Yep, today is the big 7-0 for me, thank you very much. Yeah, I know, people say I don't look 70, but that's what clean living does for ya.

Hey, you need to be forewarned that oak wilt has been spotted in the area again. Some friends of ours who live in the Winwood subdivision had to have some live oak trees removed because they had oak wilt. I asked how they knew for sure that it was oak wilt and I was told that a representative from the Texas Forest Service came out and verified it. So, here's the warning, **DON'T PRUNE YOUR LIVE OAKS NOW**...it's too late for this spring. The little beetle that spreads the disease is active now through about June. If you find that for some reason you must cut a live oak, Shumard oak, or Texas red oak, be sure to paint the cut with either pruning paint or latex paint in just a few minutes. I think it's a good practice to paint any cut made on any oak tree just for safe keeping—a good habit to get into. The little beetle that helps spread the disease does so by sticking its probe into the sap from the cut on an infected tree and then, if and when it flies around to your tree, sticks its probe into the sap from a cut you made, and **BINGO**, you've got oak wilt. Painting immediately after a cut is made is the way to seal the cut and prevent the tree from weeping or leaking the sap out. If you get the disease, your neighbors are gonna get it eventually and then it's wipeout time. The fungal disease also spreads through the roots of the trees because the roots tend to grow together where they cross.

If you see leaves that have brown veins and yet the other parts of the leaves are still green, you may be a candidate. Don't call a tree service and don't try to treat it yourself--call the Texas Forest Service and request that someone come out and verify it before you do anything else.

Now is the time to aerate and compost the lawn. To aerate means to either punch holes or cut plugs out of the lawn to allow air to penetrate the soil. One way to do it is to stick a spading fork into the soil as deeply as you can and rock it back and forth—this is the hard way, but effective. The easiest way, especially if you have a large yard, is to rent an aerating machine. This machine cuts and pulls plugs from the ground and leaves a hole about a half-inch in diameter, 3-4 inches apart, and 2-3 inches deep. This allows moisture and air to get into the soil. If you really wanna do a great job, after you aerate, add compost to the lawn. Only put about a half-inch of compost on and then water it into the holes you punched. What this does is gets the compost down into the soil where it can do more for you than almost anything else you could do. It basically re-activates the soil microbes which work on the soil to make the nutrients in the soil available to plants (your grass.) You do, however, need to get it done before the grass is very active—like about now. The grass won't be actively growing for a few more weeks, so the timing is just right, right now. Hear me? Huh? Do ya?

Pruning—there's still time to do some spring pruning. Don't prune any bushes that bloom only in the spring, however; wait until after they bloom and then prune. If you have Asiatic jasmine or other ground cover that tends to get a little woody, go over it with the weedeater or lawnmower (set at the highest level) and cut it back. It'll look kinda ratty for a coupla weeks, but it will stimulate new growth and will look like you wanted it to look when you originally planted it. When I lived in town, I cut mine every spring and then a couple of times during the growing season just to keep it compact and looking good.

Don't fertilize the lawn, yet. I'll let you know when. And definitely don't put out any weed-and-feed products. All you're doing is feeding the weeds right now.

Send your ideas, questions, or comments to gardener@gvtc.com