

Dakota Gardener

April 2010

A newsletter for gardeners in North Dakota

No. 4

Upside-down tomatoes

Spring fever is everywhere—and so are gardening commercials on TV.

One of the most popular commercials now is a kit where you grow tomatoes upside down in hanging baskets. In advertisements, Topsy Turvy and similar products have been called the “most ingenious innovation for growing tomatoes” and the “world’s easiest way to grow tomatoes.”

These advertisements are laughable. They claim tomato plants benefit because gravity pulls water from the pot to the fruits. Tomato plants don’t need this help. They have been pumping water from the soil to their fruits for millions of years before this remarkable “innovation”.

Advertisements claim the root system “explodes” and thrives in the planter. Sorry, this is not true. The root system gets *suppressed* by the planter. Tomatoes grown in the ground naturally develop a *larger* root system—three feet or more in diameter.

Gardeners I’ve talked to in

North Dakota have mixed feelings about this planter. Yes, it works, but it is not amazing. Keep in mind that if growing tomatoes upside down was the best way to grow tomatoes, we would have hundreds of acres of upside-down tomato vines grown by farmers. There are none!

Also, it is windy in North Dakota (excuse me for stating the obvious). There is a risk of the tomatoes falling off the wind-blown plants before the fruits fully ripen.

Watering is always a critical issue when growing plants in a

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NDSU

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FEATURE STORIES

Time to spring into lawn care

The weather has been crazy this spring. One week we are basking in the “summer” sun and the next week we get snow.

Now that the snow is mostly gone, let’s assess the lawn and get it strong before the summer heat arrives. The first thing to do is to remove any debris such as tree leaves, sticks and dead grass by raking.

If you have a lot of bare spots, consider reseeding or resodding these areas. Spring is a good time for this, although fall is better. Fall is best because when we cultivate the soil in spring, we trigger weeds seeds to germinate. This doesn’t happen in the fall (weeds are too smart to germinate so late in the growing season).

Many of us want to apply crabgrass preventer on the lawn. Although all of the crabgrass *plants* died over winter, you might have *seeds* in your lawn that were produced last year. Keep in mind that crabgrass seed populations are low since this weed suffers from cool summer weather, which we enjoyed last year.

Crabgrass is a warm-season grass and usually does not germinate until May. Apply your crabgrass preventer during late April (maybe a bit earlier near driveways and sidewalks where the soil warms up faster). Look at the forsythia bushes in the neighborhood if you are not sure when crabgrass germinates. Crabgrass germinates when the golden forsythia flowers appear.


The most common crabgrass killing chemical (pendimethalin) will prevent all grass seeds from germinating. So if you are sowing seed this spring, select an alternative crabgrass killer such as siduron (or just forget about the crabgrass killer).

With regard to fertilization, many of us can’t wait to feed the lawn in early spring. But there is no hurry to fertilize your grass. It often does not actively grow until late April anyway. If you fertilized last fall, you already have enough fertilizer in the ground to last you until mid to late May (which is a good time to apply a weed-and-feed application).

Fertilization in early spring generally leads to more *blade growth* (and more mowing for us) than *root growth*. A strong root system is critical to help the lawn tolerate summer drought. Fall fertilizations lead to root growth, which is another reason why lawn care in fall is so important. Still, if your lawn is thin, fertilize it this spring so it fills in better and crowds out weeds.

Once your mower is ready to go, start mowing your lawn when it reaches three inches. Cut the lawn high and let the grass clippings fall back to the ground.

Broadleaf weeds such as dandelions and creeping charlie should not be sprayed until they start to actively grow. For creeping charlie, wait until you see its purple flowers in May.

In general, we tend to overdo it on the lawn in *spring*. In the future, let’s focus more on lawn care in *fall*. That will lead to a healthier lawn that will be easier to care for, and give us more time for other spring projects! 




Tomatoes

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hanging basket. In the case of tomatoes, your fruits will be more susceptible to cracking when grown in a basket.

We already mentioned how growing the tomato in the pot will suppress its root development. This will limit the ability of the vine to find the nutrients and water it needs. Tomatoes grown in baskets have a much higher probability of developing blossom end rot compared to tomatoes grown in the garden.

If your space is limited for growing tomatoes, I recommend a big pot and the variety 'Patio'. This variety was developed for containers and will produce a nice crop of tomatoes for you. Also, place some straw or wood mulch over the base of the soil in the container to conserve moisture and reduce disease problems.

Lastly, don't get me wrong. Growing tomatoes upside down can be *fun*—and having fun is important—but be cautious anytime you hear about “revolutionary” gardening products this time of year. 

Crabapples for ND

The crabapple is one of the most popular trees in North Dakota. These trees have bright blossoms in spring and colorful fruits that attract wildlife during winter.

When selecting a crabapple, begin by looking for varieties that resist scab disease, which may cause defoliation in summer.

Then consider color. Besides the color of *flowers*, which stay on the tree for a few *weeks*, also consider the color of *fruits*, which may brighten the winter landscape for *months*.

Recommended pink-flowered varieties include 'Adams', 'Indian Summer', 'Prairifire', 'Profusion', 'Red Baron', 'Red Splendor', 'Selkirk', and 'Thunderchild'. These all have bright red fruits that will adorn your tree through much of the winter.


If you prefer white flowers, 'Red Jewel', 'Donald Wyman', 'Beverly', 'Glen Mills', and 'Winter Gem' have brilliant red fruits. 'White Cascade', 'Professor Sprenger' and 'Bob White' have interesting orange-gold fruits.



If you are looking for a special plant to highlight your landscape, consider a crabapple with a weeping habit. 'Louisa' (pink flowers/yellow fruits) and 'Red Jade' (white flowers/red fruits) are good choices.

Some people hate the mess that crabapple fruits create. These gardeners often select the fruitless variety 'Spring Snow'.

Personally, I think these people are missing out on a wonderful display of color in winter, which is naturally a drab time in our landscapes. The varieties listed above have small fruit that do not create a mess. Furthermore, the fruits attract colorful songbirds to our landscape during winter and early spring.

If you have an old crabapple that is messy, you can abort the fruits by applying two half-strength applications of Sevin (carbaryl) within three weeks of petal fall. 

Seed testers wanted!


Seed catalogs are full of new varieties every spring. This year you can find purple carrots, pink radishes, and golden watermelons. New varieties of melons and squash bred in North Dakota have been introduced. If you prefer heirlooms, many varieties developed by Native Americans in North Dakota are now available.

Are these varieties any good? We honestly don't know. North Dakota State University is developing a team of gardeners to test 106 varieties of vegetables. Everyone is welcome to participate!

Gardeners can choose from among 53 trials. Marking stakes and instructions will be

provided. There is a fee of \$1 per trial.

This is a great educational project for kids and we will provide a free trial to any child who wants to manage a trial.

To learn more, go to <www.dakotagardener.com>. Download our catalog and online ordering is available. 

GARDENING TIPS FOR APRIL

Trees and shrubs

- ☞ Don't create stubs when pruning. Stubs usually die and are entry points for diseases. Cut just above the branch "collar" (shown at right), which is the slightly thickened area at the base of the branch.
- ☞ Late April is a good time to prune evergreen shrubs. Shear off the needles that turned brown from winter burn.
- ☞ It's a good idea to remove tree wrap now. If you keep the wrapping on the tree, check it every few weeks during the spring and summer. Trees actively grow during these seasons and their trunks will swell. If the wrapping is too tight, the string that secures the wrapping can bite into the trunk, causing damage.



Vegetables

- ☞ Plant your radish, spinach, lettuce, and peas early in spring. These crops need cool weather to grow well.
- ☞ Don't cultivate your garden when the soil is wet. If unsure, do the "FistTest". Grab a handful of soil. Squish it and then open up your fist. If the soil stays together, stay off the land. If the soil begins to crumble apart, go ahead and work the land.
- ☞ Leaf litter may be mixed into your garden soil. Shred it with your lawn mower and mix 1–2 inches of the litter into the topsoil.



Lawns

- ☞ When buying a lawn fertilizer, look carefully to see how much slow-release nitrogen is in it. Cheaper, fast-release fertilizers (urea and ammonium nitrate) give us a sense of pride when we see the grass quickly green up and start aggressively growing in spring. But this aggressive growth only means that you have to mow more often. A quick spurt of grass growth provides minimal long-term benefit to the lawn. Slow-release fertilizers will gradually feed the lawn and support good healthy growth.
- ☞ Weed-and-feed fertilizers that kill dandelions and other broadleaf weeds should not be applied this early in the season. These chemicals must be absorbed by the weed leaves when the weeds are actively growing.
- ☞ Spring is a good time to pull out dandelions. Their roots are smaller this time of year. Their roots will get much longer and sturdier later this summer.



Photo credits: Urban Garden Project (upside-down tomato). North Dakota State University does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, disability, age, Vietnam Era Veterans status, sexual orientation, marital status, or public assistance status. Direct inquiries to the Executive Director and Chief Diversity Officer, 202 Old Main, (701) 231-7708.

Fruits

- ☞ For apple production, you need two different apple *varieties*, not just two different *trees*. For example, planting two 'Honeycrisp' trees won't work. You need a 'Honeycrisp' and a different variety. Bees will also fertilize apple blooms with pollen from nearby crabapple trees.
- ☞ This is the best time to prune apples (crabapples, too). Pruning will increase the sunlight and air movement within the tree's canopy. This will reduce disease problems and develop brighter red fruit.
- ☞ Rake any leaf or fruit debris from underneath fruit trees. This will greatly reduce disease problems this year.
- ☞ You don't have to go to Washington D.C. to enjoy cherry blossoms. Grow your own cherry tree! The tart varieties 'North Star' and 'Meteor' (shown) are recommended. They are naturally dwarf, growing to a mature height of about 10 feet.
- ☞ Raspberry canes may be trimmed to 5 feet tall. By removing the tops of the canes, you will have better quality fruit and sturdier canes. You will sacrifice a little yield, but only about 10%.



Flowers

- ☞ Begin to gradually remove mulching when green growth appears on your rose, perennials, or bulbs (shown). This is usually when lows of daily temperatures hover around 32 degrees.
- ☞ Landscape fabric will prevent, but not eliminate weed problems. Weeds can sometimes penetrate through these materials. Landscape fabric should not be placed under wood chips; the wood chips should be allowed to naturally decompose and enrich the earth.



“Resurrect” your Easter lily

The pure white blossoms of an Easter lily are a welcome symbol of the spring season. When your plant starts to wither, don't throw it out. You can give the plant a new life in your garden!

Start by picking off all the withered blooms. Keep the plant near a sunny window until the ground warms in June. Plant the lily in a sunny, well-drained location. When the stalk dies back, snap it off.

Your lily will send out new shoots this midsummer. The bulb may bloom again in late fall, especially if we have a late frost.

After Thanksgiving, place some mulching over the base of the plant for winter protection. In future years, the Easter lily will turn into a Freedom lily, blooming soon after the 4th of July. DG

