

Home & Garden Education Center



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PLANT SCIENCE AND LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE
EXTENSION

Good Plant Advice

By Carol Quish, UConn Home and Garden Education Center

Manning the phone lines answering people's plant and pest questions for 18 years has brought me great rewards and satisfaction when I am able to solve someone's problem. Most people are very open to answers and advice knowing the information is researched and accurate. However, I sometimes encounter people who have their own ideas of 'correct' answers. I do gently try to provide the accurate information, citing University and peer reviewed research to back it up. But they are certain I am wrong, because 'someone' told them otherwise, or they 'read it on the internet'. Well folks, not everything you read on the internet is true and your hairdresser may not offer the best horticultural advice. To dispel some common, erroneous horticultural myths that I repeatedly encounter, I am going to provide some examples of accurate, researched information on the several topics. All of the information below is correct according to multiple universities, professors and government programs.

Correct information: Butterfly bushes are great plants in the northeast. In Connecticut *Buddleia* is well-behaved, beautiful and does not spread. Our winters are cold, knocking out the germination of seed growth. Really cold winters of about -20 degrees F will even kill healthy bushes entirely. Butterfly bushes are magnets for butterflies of all types when in full bloom because it provides a lot of nectar for the adult butterfly, but they do not serve as a food source for any caterpillars. Butterfly bushes are from Asia, therefore they did not evolve on this continent with our native insects and no caterpillar will feed on it. If you like the flowers and the adult butterflies it attracts, it is fine to plant it. Just make sure you have some native larval host plants in your yard on which the butterfly can lay her eggs and the caterpillars can feed on.



Image by Dawn Pettinelli, UConn

Correct information: Brown recluse spiders do not live in Connecticut. There has never been a positive identification of brown recluse spider found in the state of Connecticut, not by entomologists and experts at the UConn Home and Garden Education Center or at the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station. The spiders do live in warmer states further south than we are located. Again cold winters keep them from coming here. Spiders eat insects; not one feeds on human or animal blood. All spiders might bite as a defense mechanism or

by accident, and then they only bite once. If you find several bites, rest assured it they were not made by a spider. Some people claim to have been bitten by a brown recluse, but you cannot identify a spider from a bite. Doctors may use the catchall diagnosis of spider bite when the sore could be from bedbugs, fleas, gnats, flies, bacterial or fungal infections or other skin conditions.

Correct information: Epsom salts is not a cure-all for all plant problems. It is magnesium sulfate. If you soil is lacking magnesium, adding Epsom salts will raise the level in the soil. The only way to tell if your soil's magnesium level is too low is to have a soil test done. Complete fertilizers do not typically contain magnesium. This nutrient is found in dolomitic limestone so if you are liming on a regular basis, your soil magnesium levels should be fine. If the soil pH does not need to be raised but the soil magnesium level is low, an Epsom salt recommendation will be made. Soil test for accuracy and correct advice.

Blossom end rot is caused by a lack of calcium in the soil, or an interruption in calcium delivery to the developing fruit caused by uneven watering. Epsom salts does not contain calcium and will not cure blossom end rot. The best solution for blossom end rot is a soil test to determine the soil's pH and calcium level. Follow the recommendations on the soil test report and be sure to provide a consistent amount of water to vegetables like tomatoes and peppers once fruiting begins.

Correct information: More trees are killed from being placed too deeply in the soil at planting time. Bark belongs above ground and roots below. Roots will not grow out of bark. Look at the trees in the forest or in parks. At the base of the tree, it gets wider. No tree grows like a telephone pole straight up out of the ground, and if you see this, it is planted too deeply and will eventually die. Always plant trees with their basal flare exposed Also mulch should never touch the bark of the tree. Mulch should be placed around a tree should be in a ring like a donut, not a volcano mounded against it. Mulch retains moisture and will create soft bark allowing insects and disease to enter through the now compromised bark. If you mulch, remember donut, not volcano. Only place 2 to 3 inches of mulch around trees and shrubs. More will impede water and air flow.

For answers to your horticultural queries, contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.