

Gardening Myths

With gardening season at its peak, many homeowners are looking for simple, quick fixes to pests and problems popping up in the garden. Many of the clients who come in on the Response Line have already tried to solve the issue at home with no success. With so many problems popping up in the landscape, do any of these wives' tales or social media tricks actually work?

Homemade Weed Killer

The Myth

Various recipes involving Epsom salt, dish soap, vinegar and other household products have been circulating social media as "safe" weed killer all spring. This remedy is as dangerous as it is prolific.

To start, Epsom salt is comprised of magnesium and sulfate and is often used as a fertilizer. As a fertilizer, this product can actually help plants grow—including weeds. You can apply so much salt that there is a negative effect on weeds but this method has two major drawbacks. Firstly, you would need a lot of salt and the cost would be substantially more than purchasing a traditional weed product. The second, and most important drawback, is that this amount of salt—enough to kill weeds—poisons your soil for other plants and soil life.

Horticultural vinegar is a product that has been used in organic agriculture as a herbicide. This is not the same product you purchase in a grocery store! This product can be hazardous to handle and is often labeled for agricultural use. Using a low concentration, such as grocery store vinegar may cause the top portion of weeds to wilt and wither but is ineffective for full weed control.

Dish soap can be trickier to determine how exactly it will effect plants. The main reason it's hard to say what it will do is that dish soap is broad term meant to describe many products, none of who's intended purpose involves plants. Many plants have a waxy layer over their leaves and stems to protect them from pests and diseases. Applying soaps may remove this protective layer and leave plants exposed to outside threats. This could be helpful in the removal of weeds but hasn't been shown to be effective. Antibacterial soaps could also negatively impact friendly soil microbes that our desirable plants rely on.

The most important thing to remember when you see recipes like this is that none of these products were designed to accomplish this purpose. Mixing products, even things you think are safe, can be dangerous. Read product labels and follow their directions!

The Solution

If chemicals aren't your cup of tea, there are alternative methods. Most non-chemical weed control methods involve planning and manual labor. Cultivating soils when you plant can help rid your garden of existing weeds, but can also bring up previously buried weed seeds. After cultivation or planting don't waste time—put down weed barriers and mulch right away. Weed fabrics, layers of newspaper or cardboard can all help prevent weeds. Add a healthy layer of compost or mulch over the top to keep moisture in and weeds out. If you're not opposed to

using store bought products apply a pre-emergent product under the barrier and mulch. This product prevents the germination of seeds so only apply it in areas that you're planting established plants, not where you're starting seeds. Once weeds appear in your garden pulling and digging is a chemical free, although sometimes difficult, way to control weeds. Some weeds, like bindweed and nutsedge, propagate themselves every time you pull them up so make sure you know what you're dealing with before you start pulling.

Deadly Soil

The Myth

We receive many calls from residents who believe there is a pathogen or chemical in their soil that is killing all their plants. While both could be a reality that is almost never the case. Unless you know of a chemical that was added to your soil, it is unlikely that your soil was contaminated. Lead soils are a very real concern in urban areas but that is because they are dangerous to people. If you think you have lead contamination, K-State's lab does test for that and other metals. Chemicals are difficult to test for in soils and most labs don't offer that service. Often when clients think their soil is the culprit the real reason their plants are stressed isn't nearly as interesting—it's often the weather. Extreme drought, heat, cold or the extremely wet spring we've had this year all stress plants, sometimes to the point of death.

The Solution

Lacking the ability to control the weather, gardeners are forced to cope with what we're given. As with any gardening problem, a well selected, planted and cared for plant will withstand much more stress than a weak plant. Select plants for our cold hardiness zone (6A) and that can withstand our extreme heat. Place plants where they want to be. Full sun plants that are planted in partial shade may never possess the same vigor as if they had been planted in a proper location.

Water can be a much trickier element to battle. When we don't have enough—supply it. Not just to your flower and vegetables but to trees and shrubs as well. When we have too much the options are more limited. Too much water makes us all wish we had incorporated more organic matter into the soil (improving drainage) or that we had installed a rain garden or dry creek bed. The time to make these adjustments is now. Build your healthy soils and look for problem areas that collect water or that allow it to run out into the street. Work to divert it where it's needed and provide a place for excess.

Just Spray It

The Myth

This is my least favorite myth! So many homeowners see a problem in their landscape and start spraying—without knowing the exact problem! It sounds silly to say but spraying random chemicals actually doesn't work. A fungicide on an insect problem doesn't work. A pesticide on a plant that is stressed from weather conditions doesn't work. Spraying the right thing at the wrong time...it doesn't work!

The Solution

There are so many great ways to find out what is wrong with your plants. My personal favorite is our Shawnee County Extension Master Gardener Response Line! This free service using trained volunteers and Extension resources to find practical solutions to your gardening woes. Call, e-mail, submit questions online or stop by! We're also very lucky to have so many wonderful local businesses that have experienced staff who can help with many common problems. If a chemical solution is part of the recommendation for your problem, make sure it's the right product applied at the right time in the right manner! Follow the label and be patient!

Shawnee County Extension Master Gardener Response Line

Monday-Thursday 1:00 pm-5:00 pm

Friday 9:00 am-12:00 pm and 1:00 pm-5:00 pm

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Topeka, KS 66604

785-232-0062 ext. 105

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<https://www.shawnee.k-state.edu/lawn-garden/garden-response-line.html>