

Our Experts Answer Your Gardening Questions

MULCHING WITH EUCALYPTUS

I am seeing eucalyptus mulch newly available for sale this spring in our nurseries and am unfamiliar with its use. Are there plants that should not be mulched with it, and does it have any special properties like repelling insects?

—R. O., PETALUMA, CALIFORNIA

One can find claims that eucalyptus mulch repels insects and inhibits weeds—a phenomenon in living plants known as allelopathy—but most researchers agree this is a temporary phenomenon at best.

“Phytochemical or allelochemical residues in eucalyptus are toxic to seedlings, and thus we would like to think that eucalyptus chips make nice bioherbicidal barriers,” explains California Extension advisor Jim Downer. “But it turns out that these are quickly leached and lost, and the weed control effect from eucalyptus mulches is about the same as that of other organic materials.”

Mary L. Duryea, assistant director of the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences at the University of Florida, has conducted research comparing several organic mulches, including eucalyptus. “Our studies show that all fresh mulches had some allelopathic effects maybe for the first three months in the landscape.”

Regardless of its phytochemical traits, eucalyptus makes an excellent organic mulch that discourages weeds, moderates soil temperatures, and promotes water conservation.

NON-FLOWERING COFFEE PLANTS

About four years ago, I bought two small coffee (*Coffea arabica*) plants. Now they are about three feet tall and bushy. I keep them under grow lights, and they are healthy but have not bloomed. Do they need a special nutrient to encourage them to do so?

—J. D., LINCOLN, NEBRASKA

Coffee plants are native to cool, sunny,

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tropical highlands, where—even under ideal conditions—it usually takes three to five years for them to flower and fruit. In the average home, it's difficult to replicate the perfect combination of temperature, soil pH (slightly acidic), humidity, light exposure, and daylength that coffee plants thrive on.

Mark Fisher, foreman of the conservatories at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, says it took four or five years for their coffee tree to begin to bloom, but now “the plant blooms a couple of times a year and sets fruit.” He advises that the closer your conditions are to those in a greenhouse, the better.

As for fertilizer, Fisher says, “I feed the plant every other week with a mild concentration of 15-0-15 fertilizer from October through March, and a 20-20-20 during the warmer months.”

So you may just need to wait another year or so; in the meantime, give Fisher's fertilizer regime a try.

PRUNING CHINESE JASMINE

I have a *Jasminum polyanthum* that is in bloom. It is also putting out runners. When and how do I prune it?

—J. C., HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

Whether you are growing your Chinese jasmine as a houseplant, or outdoors in the landscape (the latter is only possible in USDA Hardiness Zone 8 or warmer), the best time to prune it is right after flowering. For regular maintenance, thin out overcrowded growth, removing weak shoots, and cutting shoots that have bloomed back to strong buds or to a lateral branch. If the plant has completely

overgrown its space or otherwise become unmanageable, you might want to cut it back hard to within two feet of the base to allow it to rejuvenate.

If you provide it with a support for climbing, prune to direct growth. Though vigorous, Chinese jasmine is not a strong climber, and some branches may need to be tied to the support.


CONTROLLING RABBITS IN THE GARDEN

I live in the country and last year rabbits took over my backyard, eating almost all the ornamentals and gnawing on the trunks of my crape myrtle trees. Is there anything I can do to deter rabbits from my yard?

—M.E., SHIPPENSBURG, PENNSYLVANIA

“Rabbits generally gnaw on trunks and buds only in the winter, when leafy plant food is not available,” says Maggie Brasted, assistant director with the Humane Society of the United States. “In bad winters, such as the one that just ended, gardeners are more likely to notice this type of damage to trees.”

Bob Lyons, director of the JC Raulston Arboretum in Raleigh, North Carolina, says, “I have to rely on the old stuff, like collaring the lower trunk with fine mesh fencing, spraying urine-based repellents, and keeping dogs and cats roaming the yard.” In addition to mesh fencing, gardeners can use commercial barriers such as plastic or metal tree wraps—but not fabric wraps, which can promote disease.

Because rabbits prefer twigs and buds to trunk bark, Brasted says one wildlife-friendly option is to place trimmings from your fall pruning on the ground well away from your ornamentals as a food source. With luck, rabbits will concentrate their feeding on these. 

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