

April is not only Lawn Month but also the month to celebrate Arbor Day. In Washington State Arbor Day is Wednesday, April 12. The National Arbor Day Foundation gives away trees with each membership of \$10. Visit their web site at www.arborday.org. Or mail The National Arbor Day Foundation, 100 Arbor Avenue, Nebraska City, NE 68410. With your membership fee you'll receive ten trees all selected for growing in our area. The trees are mailed out February through May for spring planting or October through mid-December for fall planting. Planting instructions come with the six to twelve inch trees.

Lawns and trees don't necessarily mix well. Lawns are chemically toxic to trees. If you want to plant a tree in your lawn, be sure to make a grass-free area (10 to 15 feet across) around the tree. Cover the area with a bark or coconut fiber mulch. This tree friendly grassless area also protects the tree from the dreaded lawnmower and weed wacker scarring. I'll tell you more about trees in future columns.

I have a tree experience to share. When we bought our home seven years ago we inherited a fir tree hedge across the front of our property. The poor trees were topped to maintain views for neighbors. They were sadly deformed, very bushy and green, but pathetic. (The trees not the neighbors.) We've finally started removing the misshapen things. We definitely have our work cut out for us. The moral of this story is never, never, top trees and especially don't use fir trees for a hedge.

While we were working out in our yard I saw several neighbors working in theirs. One neighbor was broadcasting Preen to keep his beautifully landscaped garden pristine from weeds. Another neighbor was out with her huge bottle of Roundup. I'll try not to hop up on my soapbox here, but I need to offer several words of caution to all gardeners. Always read every word on the labels of these and other products before you use them in your own gardens. Especially read the "Hazard" section of the label. Remember that these chemicals soak down into the ground and eventually end up in our aquifer, well water, and ultimately travel into our streams and Puget Sound. Enough said.

There are many earth friendly ways to nearly eliminate weeds from your gardens. Hire a neighbor teenager to pull weeds for you. We've kept four kids employed so far over the years. They love the money and we love their work. You can use mulches (try bark and coconut fibers), landscape cloth, and plantings that don't leave much room for weeds to emerge. Some gardeners (Ciscoe Morris and Ann Lovejoy are two I know) pour boiling hot water on their weeds. You can kill weeds by covering really weedy areas with clear plastic and letting the sun bake the heck out of the weeds for several weeks. My husband's favorite tool is called the Red Dragon (we bought it at Winslow Hardware for about \$30). You hook it up to a propane tank, fire it up and nuke the weeds. Unfortunately sometimes edges of perennials and shrubs get singed. We use the Red Dragon to crisp all the weeds on our walkways. It's a good thing. Just don't set your wooden deck on fire (or your house).

Several weeks ago I promised to write about fertilizers. Many years I forget to fertilize and the plants thrive anyway. I use composted manure on my perennial beds every other year and till it into our vegetable beds each year about a month before planting. I also build up beds with compost. Miracle Grow is great for new plantings, on vegetables and potted plants. For my houseplants I use Shultz-Instant liquid plant food about once a month from April through September. I've also used Osmocote granules and plant food stakes on my container plants and houseplants. They're slow release fertilizers. My personal philosophy is to pick the right plant for the right place (noting conditions of light, soil, shade, wet or dry) and the plant usually survives quite well without fertilizer. However, potted plants usually need fertilizer because the water constantly runs through the soil washing away the nutrients. We'll talk about fertilizers throughout the growing season.

Washington State is the first state to adopt a law to test, limit and disclose nine toxic metals in fertilizer. The law says heavy metals in fertilizer must be at the same level as those in natural soil (or less). To check out your fertilizers visit the Department of Agriculture web site at www.wa.gov/agr/pmd/fertilizers#database or Department of Ecology Web site which gives health and safety reviews for fertilizers at www.wa.gov/ecology/hwtr/fertilizer/.

Send questions or comments to Peg at gardenmentor@yahoo.com or in care of this newspaper.