

## **Extension Notes**

Personal Column for April 13, 2010

By Gary Hall, Iowa State University Regional Extension Education Director

### **The Itch of Spring**

Early spring is when many homeowners come down with a common malady - the “spring itch” to plant, and grow things. I see the plants all lined up at the nursery and I want to buy one each to plant at my home. I can still remember what a disaster I had with my special melons I tried to grow last year. The itch to protect is great within me.

### **The Planting Itch**

This “itch” can erupt as you walk through the nurseries or see pictures in spring nursery catalogs for garden seeds, flowers, trees and shrubs.

You might see any number of shade and ornamental trees wanting you to purchase them. Beware of those “super trees”. Super trees usually have faults that should be investigated before purchase.

Unsuspecting buyers are lured by vivid descriptions of amazing growth and beauty. Each year it seems a new “super tree” is promoted. Often advertisements are exaggerated, for example, “the tree soars into a magnificent tree in just one single year”. Also, price is often exorbitant for the size and species of tree being promoted. One example of a “super tree” advertised in the past is the *Ulmus pumila*. It is true that the tree grows rapidly. However, *Ulmus pumila* is the scientific name for common Siberian elm which is non-native, short-lived, susceptible to heavy elm leaf beetle infestations, and has brittle branches that break easily in storms.

Learn the characteristics of the tree before purchase to assure that it meets your objectives. Be sure to contact a reputable nursery or a local ISU Extension office before purchase.

### **The Itch to Protect My Garden**

Last year I tried these All America Selection melons. I was so excited to see how they would grow and taste. About the time the fruit was ripening the plants gradually wilted and died. Arrrgh! The problem was bacterial wilt that was carried to the plants by cucumber beetles and there is no cure.

The bacterium that causes wilt survives the winter in the gut of cucumber beetles that overwinter in fencerows and wooded areas. When they come out of “hibernation” in the spring, they feed on dandelion blossoms and other early plants until they catch the “smell” of plants in the cucurbit family, like muskmelons and cucumbers. As they feed on these plants, they spread the bacteria. They don’t cause the disease, but they are the carriers.

Commercial growers use insecticides to kill the cucumber beetles before they can spread the disease, but organic growers have had success using “floating row covers”.

Floating row covers are made of a thin, gauze-like material that allows light, air and moisture to pass through to the protected plants. If properly installed (edges buried) it keeps insects out. It is designed to “float” on top of plants as they grow. No hoops are needed for support. Floating row covers also protect plants from squash vine borer and squash bugs or cabbage worms on cabbage and broccoli.

It is important to install floating row covers when plants are set out or when they first start to sprout. If you miss the timing, you’ll have insects growing under the cover along with the plants. If plants are pollinated by insects, the row covers will have to be removed when the blossoms open, but by then, the worst of the problem may have past and you have won the battle!

With all of the benefits that floating row covers offer, you may want to consider how they can help you prevent death and destruction to your prize plants this year.

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