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In My Garden - AUGUST 2009

by Betty Coffelt, UC Master Gardener

As August begins my thornless blackberries are just about finished and will soon need to be cut back and retied. Between watering and harvesting fruits and vegetables, this month promises to be another busy one in the garden.

I am in the process of drying raisins from the earliest grapes; I usually make just over a gallon of raisins each year. Our last peach is just coming off and I've been freezing them for use in winter months. Last week I picked 11 flats of tomatoes and I dehydrated 4 flats of Romas. It is amazing that so many dried tomatoes can fit into a quart size freezer bag!

In February I planted seeds from dozens of tomato varieties and they are all maturing now. We share with neighbors and friends and enjoy them ourselves. I have been pleased with the flavor and production of all the different types so far. The only problem has been with a 'peach' tomato that seems to have a fairly high rate of blossom end rot, which is related to uniform water application and calcium deficiency. There is still one variety that hasn't come off yet and it is the largest one that is supposed to weigh over a pound. The fruit are huge and almost ready to harvest, but I am not sure that they will be 16 ounces.

This year I started to "summer prune" my peach and nectarine trees. This keeps the tree smaller and easier to maintain. I decided I wanted to be able to stand on the ground to pick fruit and to prune. Summer pruning reduces the leaf canopy, which reduces photosynthesis, which reduces the amount of new leaf growth. Summer pruning also reduces the total amount of food and energy that is stored in the root system in the late summer and fall. The result is less overall growth. Many fruit trees can be kept under 6 or 8 feet height. For more information search "Backyard Orchard Culture" on the internet.

Check your citrus trees for cottony cushion scale. This is one critter that is easy to find. The body of the female scale is orange, yellow, or brown, but its most distinguishing feature is the elongated, fluted, white cottony egg sac attached to its body. The sac contains over 500 red eggs and the resulting length of the female and sac can be almost 1/2 inch. Like other soft scales, cottony cushion scale sucks sugars from the leaves and excretes honeydew, which is usually accompanied by blackish, sooty mold growth, and ants. Last week I had to hose off the grapefruit tree with a sharp stream of water to dislodge the scale. The immature fruit is now clean and not sticky. This is something I am sure I will have to do a couple more times before harvest.

Cottony cushion scale is usually well controlled by two introduced natural enemies. The most famous one is the red and black vedalia beetle, a lady beetle from Australia, which is very prevalent in our citrus belt. Adult female beetles lay their red eggs close to the female scale's egg sac. The newly hatched beetle larva chews its way into the egg sac and feeds on scale eggs and crawlers. (Nature can be cruel). The vedalia beetle is credited with saving California's fledgling citrus industry from destruction.

If you have chrysanthemums then start checking for ants on the top growth. They can ruin the buds on the plants. I put a small amount of Sevin dust in the tip of a old nylon and just gently tap the area that has the ants. Usually I only have to do this once, but it might need to be done again if they come back.

Because our temperatures have been so high it takes a lot of water to keep our gardens irrigated, so weeds grow at lightening speed. My two main weeds are spotted spurge and purslane. I am trying very hard to not let them go to seed. Some days I think I'm winning the battle, but other days I think the weeds are. Regardless we have to keep after them.

Something I recently started is to keep a journal of things to do next year in the garden. I've been growing grapes for about 15 years and have never had a problem with powdery mildew, but this year the Ruby Red was covered with mildew. Next year I will need to sulfur my grapes and I'll start when the new growth is 6-8" long. I am also making notes on what I want to dig up in the fall. There was one ornamental grass that really bothered my allergies last spring. Even though it's one I really like and looks great in flower arrangements, it will have to go.

Here's a fun thing… My sister, who lives in Washington went to visit Chocolate Flower Farms in Whidbey Island and sent me some chocolate mulch. I have put it on some of the potted plants on the patio. Right now it smells just like chocolate and is dark like chocolate. I'm not sure how long the fragrance will last, but it is nice now and slows you down every time you pass the flowers.

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