

KPOV – *The Point*
Gardening: Get Good at It
“Gardening Myths”
April 5, 2022

Gardeners are a helpful bunch, offering up advice over the fence, on social media, in blogs or passed along through family lore. Unfortunately, not all the advice we get holds up as a best practice under scientific scrutiny. Here are a handful of myths that crop up repeatedly.

One pertains to adding gravel or pottery shards to the bottom of containers to improve drainage. While that seems to make sense, in fact adding such materials actually hinders water movement - and the coarser the underlying material, the harder it is for water to move through it. Your best bet for good drainage is to use the same planting material throughout the entire container – or to purchase pots with false bottoms if container weight is an issue.

Living in Central Oregon, many of us have heard that Ponderosa pine needles make soil more acidic, so much so that few plants will grow beneath pines. In actuality, pine needles have little impact on soil acidity in a landscape setting. If you were to turn freshly fallen needles into the soil as soon as they fell, the drop in soil pH would be negligible and certainly not one damaging to plants. Those needles that rain down on your landscape are neutralized by microbes in our native soil. Chances are if you're having trouble growing plants under pines, the problem is because of the trees' shade or that their shallow roots compete for water and nutrients.

Repeated applications of compost will improve your soil health is another myth. Yes, adding composted organic matter to soil does improve its structure and promotes long-term plant health. But adding *too much* compost at once or even over time can be problematic because excess phosphorous and salts in an enriched soil can stunt or harm plant growth and leach into the water table.

Myths abound regarding planting and staking trees. Please disregard advice about digging “a five-dollar hole for a fifty-cent plant” and back filling it with nourishing amendments like compost, manure and peat moss. Unfortunately, while a tree's roots will initially thrive in this environment, they will resist pushing through it into surrounding native soil as they grow. Instead, they will retreat back to their more hospitable home and begin encircling it, restricting critical root spread.

Ideally the planting area should be backfilled with 1/3 soil amendment (eg. Compost) to 2/3 native soil. This will encourage good root establishment in Central Oregon.

Another myth pertains to staking newly planted young trees. We now understand that staking has an adverse effect on how trees become established because a tree's natural movement in the wind helps it develop a sturdier trunk and root system. Staking is only advised if the planting site is sloped or exceptionally windy or you are planting a top-heavy tree such as bare-root. Even in these conditions stakes should be removed after a brief period to encourage healthy root development and avoid damaging the bark. Staking should be taut to allow some movement, not tight.

And finally, a myth about removing moss from your lawn. Lime will not fix the problem. Moss thrives in wet, shady and infertile soil conditions. You can address the shady variable by pruning back your trees. If you love your trees just the way they are, consider replacing your lawn! If you don't want to do that either, try regular applications of lawn fertilizers containing nitrogen. Moss doesn't like it – but it'll like your lawn even less if it gets more sunshine.

This month the Master Gardeners are offering two webinars every Saturday with different topics each week. More information is on our website: www.gocomga.com. Click on the Upcoming Classes and Events tab on the orange bar.

For more information, call the Master Gardeners at 541-548-6088. This has been Gardening: Get Good at It on KPOV, The Point.

Resources:

Chalker-Scott, *The Informed Gardener*, Seattle, WA; University of Washington Press, 2008.

Little, Richard. "Some Garden Myths and What Research Has to Say." (2014) Oregon State University Extension <https://extension.oregonstate.edu/gardening/techniques/some-garden-myths-what-research-has-say> (Accessed 2/2022)

Pokorny, Kim. "What's the real story? Garden myths debunked." (2020) Oregon State University Extension <https://today.oregonstate.edu/news/what%E2%80%99s-real-story-garden-myths-debunked> (Accessed 2/2022)