

## E-letter # 11 – October/November 2013

Written by Peter Coppin 09/10/13 – can be reprinted as long as the author is acknowledged

Hi everyone, here are some hints & reminders for October & November.

### 1. Fertilising

Spring is well and truly with us, and all plants now have active root growth. Make sure you have applied some nutrients, and don't forget the trace elements!

The rain most of us have been getting in the last few weeks is simply fantastic, and will help incorporate what ever source of nutrients you are using.

Even though it's been damp and even a bit cool, you would be surprised just how much feeder-root activity there is.

And talking of the weather, you would've noticed it's becoming windier, especially in the morning with the south-easterlies. That brings us onto mulch.

### 2. Mulching

Up to 70% of moisture loss from soil is caused by surface evaporation, and 50 to 60 mm of a good water-wise mulch can drastically reduce that.

Even at this time of the year, those winds can be drying the topsoil out, sometimes with serious effects that we may not appreciate – [see my factsheet on citrus](#)

The other problem we have in spring and early summer is diurnal temperature changes, where it may be as cool as 7°C overnight, but then hit around 20°C during the day.

This confuses many plants, especially exotic ever-green species, where one minute they think it's winter so they slow down sap-flow, then the next they're feeling it's summer so starts sap-flow again.

This stop/start set flow can upset plants, but a good mulch will help level this out to some degree. This is particularly important for potted plants.

The best and cheapest mulch is shredded prunings, either your own or from an arborist. A great service for getting free mulch is <http://www.mulchnet.com>

### 3. Leaf-drop problems

Recently I've heard a number of people contact gardening programs about leaf drop in some evergreen plants.

A less known but not uncommon cause can be the fungal disease anthracnose, which attacks many species, in particular lemons, limes and camellias.

This is usually a problem in autumn following decent rains together with warm weather, and this spring we are having similar conditions. This is the first time I've seen it as a significant spring problem, and last week I noticed it has attacked one of my native limes.



Spring leaf-drop can be caused by a number of factors, including natural senescence, water-logging, fertiliser burn and heat or moisture stress.

With these, the leaves fall with the petiole intact as on the leaves on the left of the above photo, whereas anthracnose causes abscission at the leaf base as on the right of the photo, leaving the petiole attached to the stem.

### 3. Leaf-drop cont.

Control of anthracnose can be difficult. Copper-based compounds are the best, but only as a preventative spray, normally done in autumn. Spring copper sprays are not usually the norm with citrus and other evergreens, especially because citrus are flowering and the blossoms can be damaged.

Hopefully, this will just be a 'one-off' season and not become a perennial spring problem, though with climate change it just may happen.

### 4. Fruit-fly

Fruit-fly is now active in most areas, so hopefully everyone has started trapping and splash baiting.

Now as fruit ripen, I strongly urge you to use exclusion netting or bags, as baiting and trapping are simply NOT sufficient to get reasonable control.

Some very good products are available from outlets such as [Greenharvest](#). Tree bags are available from [Tass1Trees](#).

### 5. Fruitlet thinning

I'm sorry to keep harping on about thinning, but the earlier and more effectively you do it, the better the results. Also, if it's done before seed hardening stage it can help overcome biennial bearing to some extent (this is where trees may have a heavy crop one season, followed by a much lighter one the next).

It's critical to thin all stone fruit - the low-chill peaches and nectarines in particular.

Apples and pears can be done soon, but be careful not to damage the stems of the fruit that you leave on the tree as this weakens the abscission layer and which may cause premature fruit-drop closer to harvest.

Don't thin persimmons yet, as they will do a natural shedding during late spring, sometimes into early summer if they get moisture or heat stress.

Most grapes have finished flowering and you can see the young bunches developing. On most varieties you can cut the bottom third or even half of the bunch out, resulting in fewer but larger berries.

Even citrus can be thinned. I know it sounds difficult and tedious but it is well worthwhile, especially on mandarins.

With nearly all tree fruits, aim to have no more than two fruit touching each other, as clumps or clusters are ideal breeding places for many insects such as *Heliothis* caterpillars, and even some diseases.

### 6. Pruning

While it may be too late for detailed winter pruning, there's an old saying "better late than never". In fact, with some fruits (such as apricots) it can pay to wait until after fruit set to prune, so if it is a light crop you would prune more carefully to retain as much fruit as possible.

But now is the time to start summer pruning - you don't have to wait until after harvest. It's pretty simple - if you see new shoots all branches where you don't want them, snap or prune them off now.

Regular light prunings are much preferred on nearly all deciduous trees and vines, as frequently as:

- Stonefruit every 5-8 weeks
- Pomefruits every 8-10 weeks
- Grapes every 8-10 weeks
- Kiwifruit & persimmons – two light prunings through the growing season

With Eureka lemon, a main pruning in late July or August, with follow-up prunings in early-mid December and again in March will not only help size and shape the tree, it will induce a much longer flowering season, resulting in being able to pick lovely large fruit for 10 to 12 months of the year.

When training any plant onto a trellis or an espalier, the earlier you start the better. It's much easier to train the scaffold branches when the shoots are young and subtle. This also means you don't have to have the training wires as highly tensioned as you would if the branches are strong and becoming woody.

### 7. Irrigation

Checking the irrigation system is vital now, as soil moisture levels can drop rapidly at this time of year, which for many species is during flowering or early fruit development.

Lack of moisture now can cause negative effects later on such as small fruit size, pre-harvest drop and fruit splitting, even though a good mulch will help. I will explain more about irrigation requirements in my next E-letter.