

E-letter # 9 – July/August 2013

Written by Peter Coppin 14/07/13 – can be reprinted as long as the author is acknowledged

Hi everyone, here are some seasonal reminders for July & August for fruit trees & vines – a couple of the topics were also in the last E-letter, but they cover some important ground and are worth repeating.

1. Winter fruit tree sprays:

Early-mid July (during winter dormancy) is the right time to apply oil sprays to most deciduous trees, up to early-mid August for late-flowering trees such as apples, cherries and pears. Mid July is the best time on average. Do not apply to trees that are flowering or have new leaf growth.

This leaves a thin film of oil over all surfaces, which helps smother young mites and scales as they emerge from their eggs in late winter and early spring. In fact, it's critical for serious species such as Two-spotted mite and San Jose scale, as these can have devastating consequences and are also extremely hard to control during the growing season without using quite strong chemicals. Use products like Pest Oil® (petroleum-based) or Eco-Oil® (vegetable oil).

Even though it's not stated on product labels, you can also include another copper-based product such as Kocide in with the oil spray. If you've been having persistent problems with diseases such as Leaf curl, Shot hole, Bacterial canker, etc, this extra mid-winter copper application can be a very effective addition to the usual leaf-fall and bud-swell sprays.

You may hear Lime sulphur being recommended as a fungicide spray on stonefruits and pomefruits. Yes, it can be much more effective than copper, but it also is a miticide and kills off predator mites, resulting in a worse problem with Two-spotted mites in summer.

HINT: When mixing powder products like copper, premix the measured amount into a slurry with a small quantity of tepid or lukewarm water first as this will improve how the powder dissolves. Then mix this into the cold water in your sprayer.

2. Winter grapevine sprays:

Powdery mildew is a perennial nuisance for most grape growers, but as with most fungal diseases prevention is always better than cure, and easier. Wettable sulphur sprays are usually sufficient. However, if you have had a bad problem with this disease in previous seasons, it really does pay to use Lime sulphur instead just prior bud burst. It's a liquid spray that is more effective in seeping into cracks, under bark and behind buds. But it will burn green growth, so don't apply it after bud burst.

After bud burst you need to switch back to wettable sulphur sprays, applying the first spray just after bud burst, then another one just before or at the very start of flowering. Do not spray during flowering as it will burn the flowers.

Apply another wettable sulphur after flowering, when the new little berries are no larger than a small grape seed. This will also be of great help in controlling both Bunch mite (which can cause many of the new little berries to fall off) and Grape-leaf blister mite.

After that, just keep an eye out for mildew, as you may have to do yet another spray. The labels will tell you not to spray when the temperature is above 30° C, but you can if you do it in the evening when it is cooler and the spray dries out slowly and evenly. This disease is far worse in warm humid still weather, and I will discuss this and summer pruning grapes in an E-letter later this season.

Over the last couple of seasons, many people either experienced Downy mildew in grapes for the first time or had noticeably worse problems than in previous seasons. While I don't normally suggest you do much, if you had problems last season it would pay to treat for it this year.

Sulphur isn't effective on Downy mildew - you need to use copper sprays instead that need to be applied before flowering. If you have powdery mildew as well, you will have to do both copper and sulphur sprays, but not within ten days of each other.

3. Keep a diary:

As you can see, timing is all important for the effectiveness of preventative spray applications. So it is a really good idea to keep a diary to record critical dates such as bud swell, bud burst, first flower and full blossom.

And you need to do it for individual trees because of the huge difference between varieties of the same species. You will find difference from year-to-year, but this will be less noticeable on well-established trees. Young trees tend to be for later with bud burst and with flowering, and even fruit maturity (ripening). It's also helpful for knowing when that particular variety may start to ripen and thus be highly susceptible to fruit fly attack.

4. Planting:

Mid-dormancy is the time to plant deciduous trees & vines, though some of the low-chill stonefruit are already flowering and these should have ideally been planted last month.

Also, much of the new season's planting stock is now coming onto the market. So even if you're not ready to plant just now you will get the best selection from nurseries and garden centres.

Evergreen species can be planted now, but if you are in a frost susceptible area it may pay to wait until the risk of frost is over (as late as mid October).

What's the best planting stock? While there is still a push for bare-rooted nursery trees, I believe this is now old technology, and you have a limited timeframe between purchase and having to plant them out. To store them before planting, cover their roots with just straight sand and keep them moist, ideally in a cool, shaded part of the property.

Modern nursery production of trees in 4-7L square pots is the way to go, giving good quality plants that haven't or won't get severe root damage. Just make sure you're buying fresh stock, not last year's – another good reason for ordering/buying your trees as early in the season as possible.

5. Fertilising:

Unless you are seeing new growth (or the start of new growth) it's still too early to fertilise, as new growth indicates feeder-root activity, without which fertilisers are not absorbed/utilised by plants and therefore can leach out.

Because the start of spring flush varies so widely between species and even varieties, you need to inspect plants regularly from now on. With most species, maximum feeder-root activity occurs from first flush through to about New Year.

So at this time of year only the early flowering stone fruit varieties that have new leaf growth need fertilising, especially because they have a high nitrogen requirement.

Also, trees less than two years old are actively growing for longer than older established trees, so they may need more fertilizer applications in a year.

6. Pruning:

Now is the time to do detailed pruning on deciduous trees and vines, especially those that fruit on new wood (peaches and nectarines) or current season's wood (grapes and Kiwifruit), where the aim is to encourage replacement fruiting wood on an annual basis. On species that fruit on a combination of new wood and spurs (apples, pears, plums & apricots) this is not mandatory every year but every two-three years, but because all the leaves are off it's easier to see what you're doing if you want to clean them up a bit. On average, pruning in summer is for growth control and sunlight penetration.

If you have Panama Red passionfruit, prune in August/September to encourage flowering that results in summer fruit. Unpruned vines or pruning in December results in autumn/winter crops. I've seen a couple of clever people who prune half the vine in winter and the other half in summer and end up picking fruit for up to ten months of the year!

If you have larger trees or vines that need a canopy reduction or major reshaping, now is the time to do it as they will hopefully get some regrowth before the strong sunlight returns in summer. Remember, species such as citrus, mango and avocado can sunscald very badly. If you are concerned, apply a whitewash such as a cheap, white, water-based acrylic house paint to the northern side of any branches larger than 20mm that face north.

Hope this is of help. More workshops are currently being planned for the rest of the year, and you will be notified of them as soon as dates are set.

Cheers, Peter