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Hello Fruit Growers!

Things are progressing quickly in the orchard! The Honeyberries are in bloom and the bumble bees are enjoying them immensely. When near the plants I am reminded of the song “What’s the buzz . . .” from Jesus Christ Superstar. I think the bees know what’s happening!

The impact of weather and climate on our plants never ceases to fascinate me. I was taking a webinar class on fruit tree pollination from WSU, and the presenter (Matthew Whiting) was answering a question concerning apple tree pollination inconsistencies year to year. His response was the observation that with warmer climatic conditions the bloom times of early, mid, and late blooming varieties of apples can expand. In a normal climate, the bloom of an early and mid-blooming variety might overlap and provide successful pollination. But in a warmer climate, those bloom times can move apart. All it takes is a couple of days, and the pollination window can be missed.

This seemed similar to what I am observing in our yard in Anchorage. Last year (2019) we had a warm climate with record warm temperatures for the months of February, March, and April, followed by the one of the wettest Mays on record. This year in contrast, the climate was cool with temperatures consistently below normal until only 5 weeks ago (mid-April). So far, May has been one of the driest months of May on record.

This winter’s colder climate leading up to the onset of Alaska “spring” appears to be affecting the relative bloom times. Have you noticed that your plants are blooming closer together or overlapping this year? In our yard, the various plant’s blooming sequence appears compressed as well as one week later than last year. It will be interesting to see the sequence and timing of the bloom for the various apple trees!

As I have mentioned in the past, I have vowed this summer to take my raspberries and blueberries more seriously. To that end, I am going to experiment with actually (gasp!) fertilizing these plants. I have been studying the OSU extension [Nutrient Management Guide for Blueberries](#) and guide to [Growing Raspberries in the Home Garden](#).

In regards to the blueberries, I’m going to take baby steps until I can do a leaf tissue analysis later this summer. Fertilization will involve three light applications of fish emulsion (2 Tbsp/gal/25 sq.ft) starting at bloom time at one-month intervals. Blueberries are not high N (Nitrogen) feeders and I have a lot of organic matter in the soil to provide Nitrogen. I will adjust next year, based on what the tissue analysis reports say.

Raspberries on the other hand are high feeders. The OSU guide recommends a season total of 2-3 oz of Nitrogen per 10 ft of row (2 ft wide) of 16-16-16 or other balanced fertilizer, broken into three applications one-month apart, starting when the primocanes are less than 6 inches tall.

To figure the amount of fertilizer, it is important that you know what the fertilizer numbers (N-P-K) mean. The three numbers represent the percentage of Nitrogen-Phosphorus-(K)Potassium in the fertilizer. So, if you want to know how many ounces of N is in one pound of 16-16-16 fertilizer, you simply multiply 16 oz (1 lb) by .16 (16%) and it tells you that there is 2.56 oz of Nitrogen in one pound of fertilizer. I have 24 row-feet of raspberries, so I will need a total of approximately 2.4 lbs of fertilizer applied over three applications of around 13 oz each.

Now, I am not suggesting everyone try this. I have had good berry production over the years with only benign neglect. Let’s just say that I am curious if there are any benefits to these inputs. I will share the outcomes of my trial down the road.

In the mean-time, hopefully you have been watering. In Anchorage, we have had only a few light sprinkles of little consequence and your fruit plants need around 1.5 inches of water per week. Watering is the most important thing you can do to have good crops.

When watering trees, remember to water past the drip line as many of the tree’s feeder roots extend beyond the tree’s canopy. I think the easiest way to monitor your watering amounts is to use a sprinkler and set out a straight-sided can or container to serve as a rain gauge. Time how long you have to run your sprinkler to put down a ½ inch. Then next time, you can just set your timer on your phone for how long to let the sprinkler run. Your trees and plants will love it!

Best wishes,

Mark Wolbers  
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