# Top 10 Gardening Myths

**By Jason Miller**
December 28, 2007

**What you don't know can hurt your plants, the environment and you.**

Any budding gardeners out there? If you are, you're probably running into a wealth of information and anecdotal advice—and not all of it is trustworthy. Virtually every master gardener has a favorite "newbie" story to tell; some of the stories (like mine, which is #10) have that same master gardener playing the starring role of ill-informed rookie.

Knowing this, I decided to ask my fellow Skagit County Master Gardeners to send me their favorite myths, along with the straight scoop on the subject. Along the way, I borrowed more myths—and their realities—from our own horticultural guru, Dr. Linda Chalker-Scott, Extension Urban Horticulturist and Associate Professor, Puyallup Research and Extension Center, Washington State University.

Let's do this countdown-style, shall we?

**Myth #10: When it comes to fertilizer, pesticides and herbicides, more is better.**
**Reality:** A thousand times, no! Excessive fertilizer will usually wash away and end up in our waterways. Excessive pesticide applications can linger after the target insect population is controlled and kill non-target insects (you don't want to kill your ladybugs after the cabbage butterflies are dead, do you?). Too much herbicide can leach into the soil and find its way into waterways or, in extreme cases, contaminate groundwater.

photo by Jason Miller

When applying fertilizer, pesticides or herbicides, more is NOT better. For best results and minimal unwanted side effects, follow label instructions carefully.

**Myth #9: To control crane flies, you must apply a pesticide to your lawn every fall to kill their larvae.**
**Reality:** Follow the "square foot rule." Peel up a square foot of your lawn and peek beneath it. If you discover more than 25 crane fly larvae, go ahead and apply a pesticide (read myth #10 before doing so). And if a flock of starlings descends on your lawn, don't turn the dog loose on them; they're gorging themselves on the larvae.

**Myth #8: Ivy is parasitic.**
**Reality:** This is false. The right type of ivy can be a beautiful addition to your landscape. It holds moisture in the earth, gives animals food (it fruits after about seven years), provides cover for beneficial bugs, and it's beautiful. That being said, it's important to choose a variety that won't completely take over your landscape in less than a year! For more information, read my fellow master gardener Jane Billinghurst's brilliant ivy article here: http://www.skagit.wsu.edu/MG/2007AA/121407.pdf .

**Myth #7: Uncomposted wood chip mulches can spread pathogenic fungi and bacteria to healthy roots.**
**Reality:** There is little published literature that supports this possibility. Fungal species in decomposing wood chips are generally decomposers, not plant pathogens. Healthy soil communities include mycorrhizal species needed for optimum root health; under healthy ("aerobic" or oxygen-rich) soil conditions, beneficial and harmless fungi probably outcompete pathogenic fungi. As for the flora, most healthy plants are not susceptible to opportunistic fungal pathogens such as those that may occur in wood chip mulches. A word of related advice: Don't amend the soil itself with wood chips (in other words, don't mix them in); doing so will rob your soil of nitrogen as they decompose. Use wood chips only as a topdressing.

**Myth #6: Piling mulch up against the trunks of trees and shrubs helps to keep them cozy warm all winter long.**
**Reality:** This one is my personal pet peeve. Mulching in this manner is asking for trouble, because it holds moisture against the tree or shrub bark—for months at a time, in our climate. Bark simply is not designed to be constantly wet; if it is, opportunistic pathogens may infect the plant. So: When applying mulch, think "doughnut," not "volcano": Keep the mulch a few inches away from the base of the shrub or tree, and pile it a few inches deep from there.

**Myth #5: A bleach solution is the best choice for disinfecting pruning wounds and tools.**
**Reality:** If you're looking to sterilize your pruning tools and the pruning cuts you've made to your favorite plants, you can do better than chlorine bleach—much better. Bleach is an oxidizing agent, which means it is corrosive. You don't find bleach for sale in unlined metal containers, and there's a reason for that. If you spill it on your clothing when you're out in the back 40, you're stuck with a big, white spot unless you can immerse the affected material in clean water immediately.

Chlorine bleach is listed as an acute and chronic health hazard; it can irritate your skin and your nose, throat and lungs if vapors are inhaled. Last, but not least, bleach is extremely phytotoxic (translation: It's a nasty thing to put on your plants); any bleach left on your pruning tools will damage the tissue of the next cut. Therefore, as you've probably guessed, it follows logically that

you shouldn't use bleach as a disinfectant on pruning cuts.

The alternatives? Alcohol dips (ethanol or isopropyl alcohol) can be expensive, but are readily available, and moderately safe and effective to use. Household cleaners, such as Listerine, Lysol and Pine-Sol are readily available too, moderately safe, and can be extremely effective. Dr. Chalker-Scott names Lysol as her personal choice.


photo by Jason Miller

A bleach solution is not a wise choice for disinfecting pruning wounds and tools. Instead, use household cleaners such as Listerine, Lysol or Pine-Sol.

**Myth #4: Amending your soil with organic matter will improve water quality in streams.**
**Reality:** Not true. Remember, organic matter (OM) is fertilizer and is composed of the same elements that make up commercial fertilizers. If it is applied in excess, it will cause pollution problems just as surely as commercial fertilizers can. It is true that organic matter provides a slow release of nutrients if used in moderation, but applying organic matter at unnaturally high rates means the nutrient release is likewise increased. A heavily amended landscape soil (33 percent OM) releases much greater amounts of nitrogen, phosphorus, and other nutrients than an ideal soil (5 percent OM).

Loading up your soil with high levels of nutrients flies against the natural order of terrestrial systems; any soluble nutrients not immediately utilized by microbes or plants will contribute to nonpoint source pollution; i.e., they will run off or leach away quickly and contaminate streams and other watercourses. The best way to steer clear of any problems associated with excessive fertilization is to start with a soil test to identify nutrient deficiencies, then amend your soil to correct *only those deficiencies*.

**Myth #3: Nursery tags are an accurate indicator of final plant size.**

**Reality:** I have a neighbor who planted what he was told were "dwarf" willow trees (three of them) a foot away from his home's foundation. They're already too big for their britches; on windy days, they amuse themselves by scratching the paint off his siding.

Look, we live in a very mild climate, one that is exceedingly conducive to excessive plant growth. As one Master Gardener trainer put it, "Look at the mature height and width figures on the plant tag—and double them."

She was only half-joking.

When shopping for your next landscape plant, remember these tips:

- There is great variability within print resources regarding mature tree height
- Production nursery tags most likely contain species performance information relevant to that nursery's geographic location
- Genetics, geography, climate and plant competition will all influence the maximum height any specimen will obtain
- To determine the most likely height range for a tree in your landscape, observe how that species performs elsewhere in your location
- If no local landscape specimens exist for a particular plant, look to the Internet for plant performance information from similar climates elsewhere in the world.

**Myth #2: Corn gluten meal is an effective organic herbicide.**
**Reality:** This particular reality is painful for me to write, since I'm a big fan of corn gluten meal (CGM). I have bags of the stuff in my garage. In my experience, it has been effective in controlling new weed growth if I pull up all the existing weeds, then apply the CGM liberally and water it in. That being said, let's listen to the experts.

First, remember that CGM has no effect on established weeds; its active ingredient inhibits seed germination—*any* seed germination. And, applying it after the weeds are up and growing will only feed them. CGM is not selective and can inhibit germination of desirable plant seeds, as well as weeds. Though it may be effective in the midwestern U.S., CGM is not as effective in other climate zones, such as those in the western U.S. There are no scientific data from field trials in the western U.S. to support the use of CGM in weed control. Finally, other environmentally friendly weed-control treatments (such as sub-irrigation, mulch, or soil solarization) are cheaper and often more effective than CGM.

Try it and draw your own conclusion.

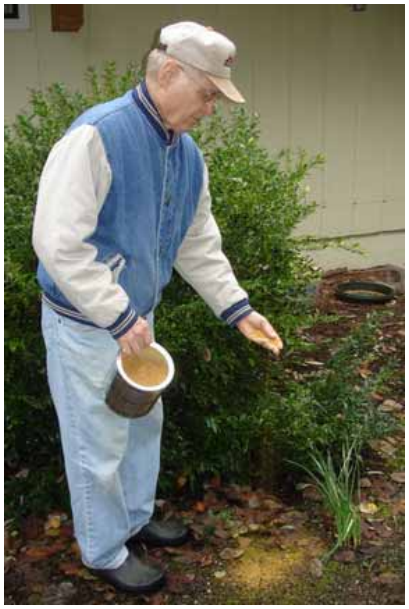
photo by Jason Miller

Corn gluten meal is not an effective organic herbicide; although; since it inhibits germination of any seed, it can help to keep annual weeds in check.

**Myth #1: Watering plants on a hot, sunny day will scorch their leaves.**
**Reality:** I hear this one all summer long. This myth refuses to die! There are many causes of leaf scorch, but irrigation with fresh water is certainly not one of them. Hundreds of scientific publications on crop plants, turf, woody shrubs and trees have examined foliar scorch, and not one of them has implicated midday irrigation as a cause. What *does* cause damage, however, is suboptimal plant-water relations, which can result in tip and marginal leaf scorch, shoot dieback, stunted growth, and leaf abscission. After drought, the most common source of these problems is salt, in particular salts containing sodium and/or chlorine.

Other causes of leaf scorch include wind stress, high temperatures, reflected light and cold stress. All of these environmental stressors are directly linked to decreased water availability in leaves.

Water, thy good name has been restored.

**Bonus myth: Watering my lawn at night prevents evaporation and keeps the grass happy and healthy.**
Reality: No, watering your lawn at night exposes it to fungal pathogens. That's why you get that orangish rust growing on it every single year. It's quite logical: Fungal pathogens love cool moisture and dark places. Watering your lawn late in the day and/or at dusk gives them exactly what they need to thrive. So stop it! Water your lawn early in the morning; this gives the grass blades time to dry out during the day, while minimizing water evaporation from the soil itself. Buy a timer, attach it to your faucet, set the timer for 5 a.m. and hook up your hose and sprinkler.

**Want more myths?**

Looking for more debunked gardening myths? Consider a subscription to *MasterGardener Magazine* (20 bucks; it's worth it), a quarterly publication that includes a "myths" column from Dr. Linda Chalker-Scott, a Q&A page, and a bounty of garden and landscape articles—all edited

for scientific accuracy. To find out more, go to www.mastergardeneronline.com.