

Spring has Sprung or Apples are Coming
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Spring has sprung and our landscapes are coming to life. Maples are blooming, lilacs are leafing out, and daffodils and tulips are starting to bloom. These changes typically bring some confusion as to what to expect for the rest of the year. Even though calls have been coming in asking about when to power rake, when to apply crabgrass preventer, and how to deal with tent caterpillars, I would like to ramble about apple trees.

Generally, homeowners give their apple trees either extensive care or they just let their tree be. Some examples include my grandfather that maybe pruned only when the tree was in dire need and spraying only when insects were discovered. Other homeowners take it to the other extreme; spraying by the book, pruning each year, thinning apples, and even fertilizing whether needed or not. Unfortunately, many homeowners are providing expensive and time consuming inputs that may not be needed for apple development.

We should think in terms of purpose. A plant's main reason for being is to reproduce; they do this by producing fruit and seeds. That means that your tree will produce fruit regardless of the growing conditions. Two questions we must ask ourselves is what quality of fruit we desire and what we are going to do with them? If our goal is to have a grocery store apple (like a commercial grower would) then we must intensively manage the tree. If we just wish to eat a few and make apple pies or applesauce the overall quality can be much lower.

For the homeowner that wants to put as little effort into the tree as possible, I would say plan on pruning as this will keep your tree in the best possible health. From there spraying for the occasional insect pest and consider fruit thinning to keep the tree from having heavy fruit one year and nothing the next. This cycling of fruit production drains lots of energy from the tree.

Fertility is important to either of these grower types. Generally, if your trees are in the lawn your turf fertility program will supply a sufficient amount of fertilizer for your trees too. You may want to apply additional fertilizer if your tree is not growing much or producing much fruit. The catch 22 here is that additional nitrogen causes more green growth and will actually reduce overall fruit production.

The take home message here is to use your head when managing your apple tree. It will produce regardless of how you manage it; timing and quality are the real issues to manage. Excessive chemicals and other inputs can be detrimental to general plant health as well as the environment. Simple items like mulch, water, pruning, and fertility can make a world of difference in the health of your tree. And lastly, what are you going to do with 200 pounds of apples?

For some additional information on fruit tree culture I would recommend the following. South Dakota Cooperative Extension has a publication entitled "Fruit Cultivars for South Dakota" that covers everything apples as well as other fruit species. North Dakota State University has one called "Tree Fruit Culture and Varieties in North Dakota" which covers the culture of fruit trees including apples. Both of these can be found online or at your local extension office.

For more information on horticultural topics check us out online at <http://www.co.pennington.sd.us/extension/extsvc.html>, or by calling the Pennington County Extension office at 605-394-2188 or by e-mail to ricky.abrahamson@sdstate.edu.