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Extension Scene

By Everett Davis

I usually try to restrict the content of this column to general topics that may be interesting to most everyone in the county. I feel that more technical information most times can be better supplied by other means such as news releases, newsletters, or personal consultation. However, due to the time of year, I would like to get a little more technical this week and discuss some topics that may be useful to homeowners, gardeners, and agricultural producers.

The time for planting crops for the coming year is here. Some early-season vegetable crops have already been planted. The milder days begin to stir the anticipation of beginning spring landscaping. Home gardeners are beginning to prepare their garden spots. And preparations are being made for the production of several hundred thousand acres of field crops within the county.

All of this preparation carries with it a certain amount of optimism that the crops planted will provide maximum yields no matter what. But there are a lot of factors that can influence how well these crops can produce. We still remember the devastating effect of last year's drought, and we can probably remember several instances during recent years where weeds, diseases, insects, or other factors reduced our dreams to the reality of near failure.

At this time of the year, the most important factor we should concern ourselves with is that the condition of the soil is proper for the growth of the plants. In most cases, once the plants are established, there is little that can be done to correct serious problems. All that we should have to do during the growing season is to carry out routine maintenance practices.

The major factor in relation to soil condition is the proper pH. Most plants that are grown in this area perform best with pH levels from 5.8-6.2. There are exceptions to this such as azaleas and centipede grass which like acid soils and alfalfa which likes basic soils. If the pH is not maintained at the proper level, many other factors may become major problems. Blossom-end rot on tomatoes, how well herbicides perform, early plant growth and vigor, and susceptibility to diseases are all related to the soil pH. Many times the blame for poor performance is placed on the weather, the variety, chemicals, or fertilizers, when in fact, the soil pH was so limiting that the other factors could not perform properly.

Don't guess at the pH level or just summarily assume that lime is needed. Applying lime to areas that do not need it can cause as many problems as not applying any at all to areas that do need it.

Another factor that should be considered prior to planting is the amount of fertility that will be required by the plants. You can draw a comparison between plants and humans and quickly realize that the proper amounts of nutrients are necessary for proper growth and production. Sure, plants will probably live if they don't receive enough of a certain nutrient, just as we can continue to live if we don't receive enough of a certain vitamin, but it can't be expected to perform at its highest potential.

Too much of a certain nutrient is generally not harmful to a plant as long as it is not in extreme. In this case, the plant simply will not use more than it needs. This is not a great concern to those with small areas such as gardens, because an extra \$10 doesn't make much difference. But what about a farmer who has 500 acres of crops and spends \$10 per acre on fertilizer that will never be used. The \$5,000 would look a lot better if it could be shifted from the loss column to the profit column.

The question of soil pH and soil fertility can only be answered accurately with a soil sample. It's never too late to take these samples, and remember, they are free. The Agricultural Extension Service and many local agrribusinesses will be glad to help you determine the needs of your soil for the coming year.

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59¢
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SPAGHETTI ELBOW MACARONI VERMICELLI
2 \$1
1-LB. PACKS

ROBESON TECHNICAL COLLEGE
by Bob Denham

Special Legislative Funding Helps RTC Faculty Keep Pace With Changing Technology

Admittedly, Jack Klutz knew little about sequential multi-port fuel injection. He hadn't had much experience with electronic processors either.

As an instructor in the auto mechanics program at Robeson Technical College, it's Klutz's business to know about such things. Unfortunately, he said, schools do not always have the resources to keep pace with technology.

"Product information is already in the hands of the customer at least one year before I get it at school," he said. Thanks to special legislative funding, Klutz no longer has to wait.

"RTC received this year from the General Assembly \$12,325 to implement a training program that concentrates on upgrading faculty instruction and increasing faculty knowledge in technological advances.

One way RTC can keep its instructors abreast of changing technology is by tying into industry and business. Klutz recently completed two weeks training at the automotive shop of a local car dealership.

"I had an opportunity to learn more modern electronics... the computer which controls the drivability of a modern car. Now I know how to diagnose and troubleshoot the modern car.

"Another example is working with sequential multi-port fuel injection. It came on the market this past year. Now, I've had practical hands-on experience in repairing this type of equipment. It's a lot easier to teach students something you've worked with than to blindly dig it out of a book."

About 30 instructors will participate in a wide range of training activities says Frank Leggett, vice-president for Educational Programs. Not only will faculty have the opportunity of returning to industry or business to upgrade skills and increase knowledge, they'll benefit as well from graduate courses, workshops, seminars and consultants. They'll also be able to visit similar programs in the community college system to see how other instructors structure their classes and which techniques they use.

Carpentry instructor Henry Bruce, the first to take advantage of the program, said his experience with a local construction company helped his perception of the job market.

"I found out that there was a demand for good finish and trim carpenters," he said. "I now see a need to concentrate more in that area, maybe allowing more time in the quarter for finish work."

By April 1, Leggett hopes each of his vocational instructors has taken advantage of the training program.

"I don't think there's any doubt that their knowledge will be current and more advanced," Leggett said. "It'll improve our communications and working relationship with business and industry."

"The graduate courses will improve the credentials of our instructors and at the same time satisfy the accrediting agencies.

"In the long run, it's going to help the student. The knowledge and experience our instructors bring back will be incorporated into the classroom and hopefully that will benefit the skill level of the students."