March efforts save time, profits later

March is your best chance to save time during the busy season. The work you do in March is largely preventative and can greatly reduce surprises later in the season, for both you and your customers.

Preventative work includes application of preemergence herbicides for crabgrass control; dormant oil spraying of trees and shrubs for control of aphids, scales and mites; tree and shrub fertilization, and pruning.

Of course, all work is dependent on labor and scheduling. If you employ seasonal laborers, you might consider bringing them back one month prior to the busy season for retraining and to perform preventative landscape maintenance.

Pruning and fertilization can be done later, but March is optimum timing. Doing it in March lightens your load during the busy season.

Crabgrass control

Technically, crabgrass seed in the soil germinates when the soil temperature averages 55 degrees F. Since few companies have the ability to monitor soil temperature for all areas they serve, the best solution is to concentrate on a six- to eight-week window where crabgrass has historically germinated in your area. Another common indicator of crabgrass germination is forsythia bloom.

The two-month period for preemergence herbicide application ranges from the beginning of March in Texas and Florida to the beginning of May in Ontario. Mid-April is the time cited most by turf weed specialists in the transition zone.

Two applications may be necessary to effectively control crabgrass germination for the entire period. Preemergence crabgrass herbicides include Balan, Betasan, Dacthal, Ronstar, and Tupersan. They should be used on established turf with the exception of Tupersan.

Do not disturb the soil surface during the two-month period since this greatly reduces the effectiveness of preemergence herbicides. Aerification, thatch removal, and verticutting should be done at another time, preferrably the fall.

Pruning out damage

Ice and wind of winter inevitably cause branch breakage. March is a good time to inspect and prune trees before they leaf out and conceal winter damage, galls, and insects. It is also an optimum time from the standpoint of wound healing.

Young trees require annual pruning for a few years after transplanting to eliminate v-crotches, to highlight the dominant leader, and to remove suckers. Trees requiring extra attention are crabapples, silver and red maple, ash, birch, beech, and linden. All trees should be examined for damage, disease, and insects.

Overgrown shrubs can be reshaped before rapid growth commences. In fact, the dimensions originally intended for a landscape can be restored at this time. Access to shrubs may be easier prior to emergence of bulbs and perennial flowers.

You may want to delay pruning of some spring flowering shrubs since buds are already formed. These include forsythia, lilac, weigela, spirea, bushy dogwoods, potentilla, and mock orange. Flowering shrubs which can be pruned without losing buds are Rose of Sharon and viburnum.

Dormant oil sprays

If you keep good records you are aware of areas or accounts with sucking insect problems, such as aphids, many scales, and mites. Linden, ash, and crabapple may require annual attention.

March is one of the best times to control these pests without using more toxic materials. It also greatly reduces the breeding population of the pests before they reproduce.

Some plants are sensitive to oil and should not be sprayed. These are primarily thin-barked trees which include birch, beech, hickory and walnut.

Prune first, then apply superior oils in the 80- to 100-second category. This is also done before leaf break. Spray to the point of runoff.

Tree and shrub fertilization

Studies have shown trees and shrubs benefit most from fertilizer applied prior to spring growth. Fertilization is critical for trees that suffered from disease and insect attack the previous year, plants in raised beds or containers, and plants which serve a key role in the landscape plan and can not be easily replaced. As a preventative measure, set up a two- or three-year fertilization cycle for all important trees and shrubs.

The majority of tree roots are in the top 12- to 18-inches of soil. Nitrogen applied to the surface can leach down to the roots. Potassium, phosphorus and minor elements will not leach down from the surface and have to be placed within the root zone for the tree to utilize them. Once they are in this root zone area, however, they do not leach out and last much longer than nitrogen, possibly years.

Other March ideas

Efficiency is a primary source of profit today. Surprises which lower efficiency by increasing costs rob profits.

Mowing, fertilization, or weed control crews should not have to waste time picking up fallen branches, repairing broken irrigation heads, or pruning out tree and shrub damage. The more disruptions faced by crews the less able you are able to manage their time and your profit.

If there are special jobs to do, March is the best time to rent special equipment also. Chances are the equipment will be available, recently overhauled, and possibly cheaper than during peak season.

The more prepared you are for the busy season, the more efficient you'll be. Planning and preventative maintenance put you ahead of others. **WT&T**

Landscape Log is written based on previous publications by Dow Gardens Horticulturist Douglas Chapman, the Weed Control Guide from March 1983, and TECH SPECS from August 1983.