Acreage Living

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Skunks Can Be Real Stinkers!

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Skunks are the most well-known members of the weasel family. Like all their relatives, including otters, badgers, mink, and weasels, skunks have musk glands located near their anal openings. Usually used for marking territory, skunks also use their s for defense from predators. It is this character that makes them so well-known!

Iowa has two species: the striped skunk and the spotted skunk. Striped skunks are common statewide, are about the size and weight of a house cat, have short legs with strong claws for digging, and are active mostly at night. Spotted skunks, once common in Iowa, are now on the state endangered list. They are smaller than their striped cousin and have various patterns of white spots on their backs, sides, and tails. The white-on-black fur in both species is easily seen at night by other animals and serves to warn them not to get any closer. Only great horned owls seem relatively immune from the spray that burns the eyes and noses of other animals.

Striped skunks have adapted well to the changes we have made to the landscape. They are common from central Canada to northern Mexico and in all lower 48 states. Though insects and insect grubs are their favorite foods, mice, rats, berries, and small grains are also parts of their diet. They also take advantage of our domesticated poultry, eating eggs and birds when given access. While hollow logs, shallow burrows, and brush piles are used for dens, they readily adapt to old buildings, raised decks, and skirted trailers.

Aside from their offensive smell, their burrows, diggings in lawns, and eating poultry often put them in conflict with humans. Also, they are often identified with rabies outbreaks every few years in some parts of the country. As with all wild animals, people should avoid contact with odd-behaving skunks: animals out in the daytime, staggering, aggressive behavior, etc. Move yourself, children, and pets away and report it immediately to local animal control authorities.

In Iowa, skunks are considered fur bearers and are subject to game laws. Still, homeowners are allowed to protect their property. Prevent problems with a bit of forethought: fence the bottom of raised

decks and trailers, burying the fencing at least six inches; clean up yards, garages, outbuildings, etc. to prevent attracting rodents that, in turn, may encourage skunks and give them shelter. If they take up residence anyway, some frightening lights or sounds or smell repellents (naphthalene crystals or ammonia-soaked rags) may prove to be temporary, very short-term solutions—but use them ONLY in combination with exclusion and prevention methods. There are NO toxicants registered for skunks. As a last resort, trapping and removal are possible and legal in Iowa but is best done by professional animal handlers. Animals may be euthanized or released at least 10-15 miles from the area.

While a variety of tales concerning removing skunk spray exist, here's one that actually works! The recipe was developed in 1993 by Paul Krebaum, a chemist working on thiols—the stinky chemicals that, among other things, make feces and other decomposing flesh stink and are present in abundance in skunk spray. Mix one quart of 3% hydrogen peroxide with one-fourth cup baking soda and one teaspoon of liquid soap. Apply immediately. Rinse off with tap water. (The bubbling neutralizes and volatilizes the thiols, carrying them away in the oxygen.) This can be used on cloth, pets, wood, or other material that has been sprayed.

Time to Prune Deciduous Trees

by Sara Helland, ISU Research Associate, Plant Pathology
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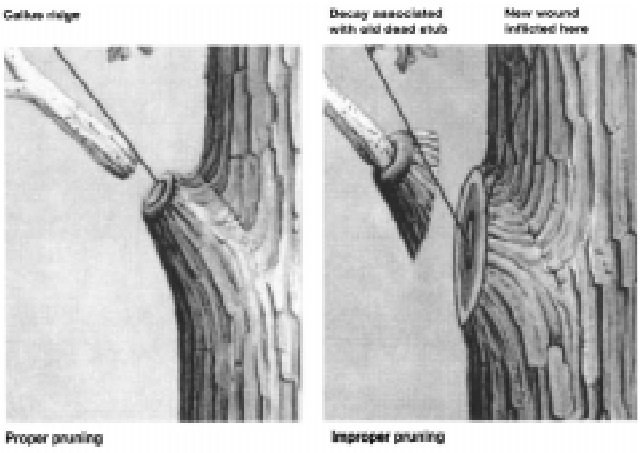
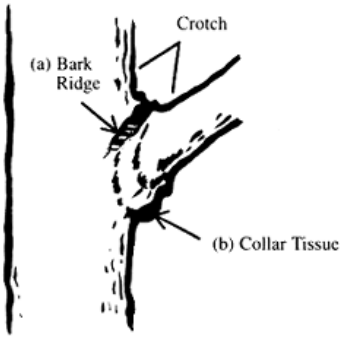
Many people think winter is a season to relax in front of the fire and take a break from the garden. However, our deciduous ornamental and fruit trees need us to bundle up, head outside, and give them some attention. Winter is the best time for pruning. Trees are dormant and many pathogens are absent so a wound in the tree is less likely to result in infection. Deciduous ornamental trees flowering after May should be pruned between January and March. These include trees like oaks, elms, and maples. Deciduous fruit trees should be pruned in late winter.

There are a number of reasons for pruning trees. It is important to remove dead and diseased tissue before the infection spreads to the rest of the tree or to neighboring trees. If your fruit trees are getting too large, pruning is a good way to keep them "dwarf" size. Prune young trees to develop a healthy branching structure that is important to a long life as a beautiful mature tree.

Establishing a scaffold (the main branches of a tree that determines its shape) while a fruit tree is young results in good fruit crops and reduced disease in later years. If the canopy is too thick, pruning will open it up. It will increase air flow and sunlight thus reducing disease and insect infestation. Trees also can be pruned for your safety. Remember those annoying low-hanging branches in your yard last summer? Pruning these branches now is a healthier option than breaking them off with your head while mowing next summer.



Before beginning your winter pruning, get the necessary tools. Use hand pruners to trim branches up to 3/4 inches in diameter. Bypass blade pruners, with a curved head, are the best option for those thin branches. Use lopping shears, with long handles and a bypass blade, for branches 1-3/4 inches in diameter. Use fine- or coarse-toothed pruning saws to trim branches three inches in diameter, as well to remove smaller branches in tight areas where hand pruners or loppers can't reach. Use chain saws for larger jobs.



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Trim branches at the intersection of two limbs or between the branch and the trunk. Make the cut at the outside edge of the swollen, rough area at this junction, called the bark ridge. Hold shears at a 40 to 65 degree angle from the bark ridge. Don't trim too far away from the bark ridge or you'll leave a big stub of branch sticking out. This provides bacteria and fungi an entrance point when spring arrives.

Never "top" your tree by trimming upper branches through their middle. This results in more growth and possible infection sites, and you may find yourself standing in the cold even longer next winter. Prune away "suckers," the branches that persistently grow up from the base of the tree, by cutting them at their base.

The rules for pruning are not hard and fast and your best bet is to cut in places that seem like natural branch points in the tree. Please contact your county ISU Extension office for more information on pruning methods.

Sheep and Goat Scrapie Eradication

by Dan Morrical, ISU Sheep & Grazing Specialist
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Sheep and goat producers need to be aware that as part of the National Scrapie Eradication process, all ewes and intact (non-castrated) sheep and goats will require either a scrapie premise tag (for sheep) or registration tattoo (for goats). The scrapie tags need to be applied just prior to when the sheep leave your farm. So if you are marketing replacement ewe lambs or cull ewes or rams, the tags need to be applied before the sheep change possession. Tags are free and can be ordered by calling the Federal Veterinary Office in Des Moines 515-284-4140. All sheep and goat producers must participate. For more information, call Dan Morrical at Iowa State University, 515-294-0847 or Sharon Fairchild, USDA Field Veterinarian at 515-669-3727.

Scrapie is a fatal, degenerative disease affecting the central nervous system of sheep and goats. There is no cure and there is no treatment for scrapie.

For details and further reading, information is presented at the following two web sites: http://www.animalagriculture.org/scrapie/Scrapie.htm; http://www.aphis.usda.gov/vs/scrapie.htm

Thermostat Setback

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Energy savings? Comfort? Fuel bills? Every year we are faced with these familiar questions when it comes to setting the home thermostat. Thermostats vary from the old familiar single dial, to programmable units that can run a different temperature pattern every day of the week. But, the primary question still remains. Will I save money by turning the thermostat down?

The simple answer to the question is "yes." Experts advise that in our midwestern climate, each degree change in the thermostat setting will change your annual heating bill by about 3 percent. However, it may not be that simple. If you are wondering only about nighttime setback, or work hours setback, remember that this is less than a full day of thermostat change. For example, if you choose a nighttime setback of 5 degrees from 10 pm to 6 am, then your savings estimate would result from 5 degrees of setback for 8 hours (one third of a day), or 5 times 3 times one third, resulting in five percent expected savings.

The goal is to save as much energy (and money) as possible without harming your comfort. For most people, simply lowering the thermostat setting by one or two degrees and wearing a sweater may be the best alternative. A simple manual nighttime or work day setback of 5-10 degrees can save even more. Programmable thermostats, starting at about $30, can make the adjustment for you so that you wake up or come home to a comfortable temperature. These thermostats can pay for themselves in one or two heating seasons.

For more information on thermostats and heating costs, visit with your heating contractor, your Extension Ag Engineer, or check out these bulletins:
http://muextension.missouri.edu/xplor/hesguide/houseeq/gh4860.htm
http://www.eren.doe.gov/erec/factsheets/thermo.html

Lingo Lexicon
Watershed - the land area draining into a specific river, lake, or water body. Watersheds can be very large (such as the Mississippi watershed that covers 1.2 million square miles) or very small (such as the the Bull Creek watershed that includes my yard and another 2 square miles). Each watershed is made up of many smaller watersheds. Major watersheds are assigned identification numbers called HUCs (Hydrologic Unit Codes). If you have internet access and would like to learn more about watersheds, visit the EPA "Surf Your Watershed" web site at http://www.epa.gov/surf/

Lingo Lexicon correction:
Last month, I had an error in the Lingo Lexicon on the Kyoto Protocol. The internet link for more information was missing a character. The correct link is: http://www.state.gov/www/global/oes/fs_kyoto_climate_980115.html

Acreage Living is published monthly. For more information, contact your local county ISU Extension office.

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