

Summer growth shows up my poor spring staking

Waterloo Region Record

By David Hobson

I should have covered this topic back in May, but after the windy weather the past week or so, it's currently relevant. The cool weather and copious rain during July resulted in more growth than I anticipated, and it soon became clear that I should have been more conscientious about staking after watching heavy winds bend top heavy plants over. I did stake a nunn in spring — pole beans and the new goji berry, and I did jam a few canes in here and there to support potentially lanky plants.

I've made note of the victims and resolved to do a better job of providing support at the optimum time; that is before the plants become unmanageable. Trying to drive in a stake and get a noose around a plant that's taken a dive without breaking stems and crushing anything else in the flower bed is always frustrating, and the lynched plant never looks quite the same. My prize dahlia looks contorted, the gorgeous flowered heads that had been gazing forth, seeking admiration now peering off in all directions like a tossed and mobbed bridal bouquet. I used a couple of canes earlier this summer, they weren't sturdy enough.

What I should have done is given them the same attention I gave my tomatoes and provided all my floppy plants with sturdy metal cages. There are many types on the market, some designed specifically for plants like delphiniums. Others are more artistically designed than tomato cages and they do a fine job when installed early in the season. Some are in parts that can be snapped together around a plant, which is ideal if you've left it a little late, as some gardeners do prefer to wait until plants have reached a point where support is becoming necessary. That way it doesn't look like they're trying to grow hockey sticks (which make excellent plant stakes).

If I have one concern, it's that overly elaborate or artistic cages can be obtrusive, drawing attention away from what it is that it's supporting. I really don't want garishly coloured scaffolding all over my garden, unless it's an actual trellis or art. I prefer to use bamboo canes, wooden stakes, or rusty steel — even old tomato cages, all of which become less obvious as growth progresses.

One method is to place a few sticks or canes around the plant then loop string from each to form a net. As the plant fills out the structural support is hidden. In some of the public gardens I've visited, I've seen brushwood from the pruning of trees and shrubs become an art form in itself. Still green branches are placed at angles around a plant and interwoven, or in some cases bent back into the ground to form an arch. The result is an elegantly unobtrusive support for the plant, which is much more esthetically pleasing than a single stake and noose. This is more of an emergency measure, and one I've used often enough, but if required make sure the material that goes around the stems is soft enough that it doesn't abrade, and loose enough that it won't choke the life out of the plant. Where possible, place the stake at the rear where it won't be visible.

It looks as though I'll be tying and tidying plants for a while yet as things don't seem to want to stop growing this season. Next year I'll try to remember to start in spring. Must remember playoffs — hockey sticks — plant stakes.

Now that we're deep into fruit harvesting season, there's a useful new book out called *Growing Urban Orchards*. It's an invaluable source for the fruit tree grower on the ups and downs and how-tos of fruit tree care in the city. Written by orchardist, Susan Poizner, founder and co-ordinator of Toronto's first community orchard in a public park, it covers all aspects from tree choice to pruning, feeding, and pest protection. More info at www.orchardpeople.com

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