

A Greener View: Sump pump water doesn't harm plants

by Jeff_Rugg

Q: I planted my tomato plants next to a discharge pipe from our sump pump. There are irrigation holes in the line which soak the area within 1 foot of my plants. After reading your article on gray water, I'm wondering if this is a safe water source?

If not, would it be too late to move them or should I destroy them? They have been in the ground for three weeks and are growing great. Could you please advise?

A: Your plants should do fine. The sump pump water is similar to well water. It is coming from the ground after it has been filtered underground for a while. A well may be several hundred feet deep, but the sump pump water has only been filtering through the ground for 5 to 10 feet down to the basement level of your house.

It isn't necessarily sterile or pure, but it shouldn't have harmful bacteria in it. You wouldn't drink it, but your plants can use it just fine.

Underground water flow can be very different than above ground flow. My house has been around for over 40 years and has never used the sump pump; however, the house two doors away has an algae covered driveway from the constant flow of water from their sump pump.

You will need to watch your sump pump flow. It could overwater the tomatoes if too much comes out. If you depend on it to flow and it dries up, the tomatoes could suffer, so just keep an eye on the amount of water they are getting.

Q: We have not been in our home too long, just a couple of years, but it has been long enough for me to start hating my trees. The house is older and the trees are big.

When we bought the house, the honeylocust tree had no leaves. The first summer it dropped a bunch of brown seed pods on the lawn and street. They blew into the neighbor's yard and now there are small trees popping up all over the place.

Today I walked outside to find my driveway covered in a layer of green velvet an inch deep. The tree is raining down hundreds of small green flakes. In the fall, the leaves are too small to rake effectively. I want to cut it down and get a better tree, but it is going to be costly.

Is there something I can do to the tree?

A: Welcome to one of the joys and trials of homeownership, trees. The honeylocust tree is one of the most commonly planted trees in North America. It is tolerant of heat, cold, drought and neglect, making it a great urban tree. Most people like the amount of light those tiny leaves allow underneath, so that grass can grow. Big healthy trees make a pleasant neighborhood and probably save you money on your cooling costs.

The original honeylocust trees have long thorns up and down the trunk. The thornless varieties started being produced in the middle of the last century and were thought to be fruitless, too; however, it turns out that some individual trees will produce those long brown bean pods after they mature enough.

You won't know if yours will produce them until it is older than 30 years old. Often they produce fruit only once every few years. But when they do, they grow in abundance. Cleaning the pods up as soon as possible for a couple of weeks will prevent the seeds from falling out of the pods. Then you won't have as many new trees sprouting up. A few weeks of cleanup every couple of years isn't that bad is it?

The green rain is actually a good thing. It is the small dead flowers. Every one that falls off is another seed pod that won't be growing this year. Usually they don't all fall off at once. If they do, a day or two of cleanup will allow to be done for the season.

As for the leaves, try a rake with closer tines, a leaf blower or a leaf vacuum, and be thankful they are not huge oak leaves.

Q: I have been planting flowers in an old flower bed left empty by the previous owner. Every once in a while, I come across groups of what looks like dried insect eggs. They are white, small - about the size of a BB and crunch when squished.

What kind of bug are they and what should I do to treat them?

A: I think what you are finding is actually a mineral called perlite. Perlite is a generic name for naturally occurring siliceous rock. The rock is about 40 percent silicon and aluminum, 40 percent oxygen, about 4 to 6 percent water and a handful of other elements.

It is a natural glass that is classified as chemically inert. The fun thing about perlite is that when heated to about 1,600 degrees, it pops like popcorn from four to 20 times its original volume. The popping creates tiny bubbles that account for perlite's light weight.

Perlite is used as a fireproof insulation and can be mixed into concrete, plastic and other materials for many industrial uses. It can be used as a filter for swimming pools and pharmaceuticals, and an abrasive in cleansers.

It may be used by itself for rooting cuttings. Because it retains air and water well, it is utilized as a component in many light-weight soil mixes.

It does not decay or break down. If someone planted a flower in your yard and then removed it without digging up the old root ball of soil, the perlite will remain. It is beneficial to your soil as it helps loosen it, holds air when the soil is wet and keeps water when the soil is dry.

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