

# Urban Horticulturer

January 2001

## ***COLD WEATHER***

Unfortunately, many of our cold sensitive plants in central Florida have been devastated by this unbelievable stretch of cold weather. In Lakeland, I have seen badly damaged hibiscus, oleander, pothos, b a n a n a s , p a p a y a , philodendron, tibouchina and many other warm season plants. I lost ten 5 gallon buckets of tomatoes just beginning to produce ripe fruit when I left them outside over night just one time. I thought the temperature was going to be 35-40 degrees F. and it turned out to be 27. As I reported in the October Newsletter, cold sensitive plants need to be covered with sheets, blankets and mulches that provides cover all the way to the ground and not touch the leaves, or they need to be brought inside.



You will not know the full extent of the damage to cold sensitive plants until warm weather returns and plants begin new growth. During the next few weeks check for freeze damaged leaves, stems and other plant parts. Most plants continue to die back for a few weeks after being damaged by cold, so hold off on pruning until warm

weather returns. To determine if a stem is dead or alive, use your thumbnail to lightly scratch the bark. If the inner bark is green

then the tissue is alive, and conversely, if it is brown or black the tissue is dead. Make your pruning cut within the area of live tissue. Some plants including crotons, fire spike, philodendron, bananas, tibouchina, bird of paradise, may be killed back close to the ground, however; they can grow back from the ground up, so give them until the end of spring before replacing. Hibiscus also will stand a lot of cold damage without being totally killed.

Water when the soil becomes dry, but a lot of water and fertilizer is not going to help freeze damaged plants. However, your cold tolerant plants should be fertilized and watered on a normal schedule. Many lawns will turn brown, but continue to mow to control winter weeds.

I have not heard of any seriously damaged citrus fruit in Polk County, other than lemons and limes, so if the fruit appears to be firm and vigorous and smells good it should be OK to eat.

## ***NEW PLANTINGS***

Winter is the ideal time to clean up shrub beds and get rid of old plants and replace them with new ones. Planting during the winter allow plants time to develop new roots and become established before they resume top growth in the spring.



Consider planting cold tolerant plants in your

garden. Also, consider the drought quality of the plant. Contact the Extension Office for lists of cold and drought tolerant plants.

After having determined the kind and number of plants you need, the next step is to go out shopping for reasonably priced, good quality plants. Inspect plants closely and don't purchase any with unhealthy appearance or with weak, poorly formed, scarred, or cracked branches. Avoid plants with leaves of abnormal size or with excessive yellowing since this is an indication of a plant health problem.



Avoid plants that are infested with aphids, lace bugs, spidermites, whiteflies or scales. These pests suck juices from leaves and stems and can seriously damage a plant. Some of these pests are so small they can only be seen with a magnifying glass. However, you can readily detect their damage to foliage which looks like a spotting or flecking on the upper leaf surface.

Check for cold injury. Plant stems and roots unprotected from frost or freezing temperatures may be damaged. Obvious cold injury symptoms are brown leaves, bark splitting and dead branches. Some plants may not express cold injury symptoms until they are stressed by warmer weather in the spring. Therefore, if you are buying plants after a hard winter you should closely inspect their roots and systems in spring for signs of root injury or split bark.

The root system of a container-grown plant should be well established so that the root ball stays intact when the container is removed; however, the plant should not be root bound. Root-bound plants have a mass of roots circling near the outside surface of the container medium and may present difficulty in establishment in the landscape. Roots

should not protrude outside the container or penetrate the ground. The root ball should be free of weeds, which will slow the establishment rate of the plant and may spread into the surrounding landscape.

After purchasing the plants you are ready to place them in your landscape. Begin planting by digging the planting hole 2-3 times the diameter of the root ball. The planting hole should never be dug any deeper than the height of the root ball. Disturbing the soil beneath the root ball may cause it to settle too deeply in the soil. The top of the root ball should be even with the existing landscape.

After placing the root ball into the planting hole, backfill the bottom half of the space around the root ball with existing soil. Mixing amendments such as organic matter into the backfill soil provides no benefit. Tamp the soil to settle it around the root ball, but not so heavily as to compact the soil. Finish filling the hole with loose, unamended soil and gently tap again. Settle the soil by pushing a hose with running water in and out of the backfill soil all around the hole. The construction of a saucer-like catch basin around plants from the extra fill soil will aid watering by holding the water until it drains down to the plant roots. The water ring should be removed by the end of the second growing season.



The last step in the planting procedure is the addition of a 2-3 inch layer of mulch around the plants. Mulches reduce soil temperature fluctuations, prevent packing and crusting, conserve moisture, help control weeds, and improve the appearance of the landscape. Common mulch materials include leaves, pine needles, bark, and wood chips. Mulch entire shrub beds with a layer of mulch. When mulching individual shrubs in lawns, cover an

area at least two times larger than the planting hole. This will help eliminate competition from turfgrass. Pull mulch 2-3 inches away from the stems of shrubs. The high moisture created by the mulch increases the chances of stem rot which can result in death of the plant.

Shrubs require months to develop roots into surrounding soil; therefore, they should be watered as frequently as when they were in containers. Strive to maintain constant moisture in the root ball, but avoid keeping it saturated. The first few weeks after planting, water the root ball every day. Gradually decrease the frequency of irrigation to every other day and then to every third day. Once the plants are well established, they do not need to be watered as often, but they should not be allowed to suffer from lack of water. Shrubs will benefit from a small amount of slow release fertilizer applied to the top of the root ball 4-6 weeks after planting.

If groups of shrubs are to be planted in beds, prepare the bed by spading or tilling the entire bed to a depth of 8-12 inches. If shrubs are already present, keep spading or tilling activities outside their drip lines. Around trees, do not spade or till simply dig a hole for each shrub. There may be some benefit to amending the soil in the entire planting bed with peat, compost or some other soil amendment. If soil amendments are used, mix 2-3 inches of organic matter into the top 6 to 12 inches of soil before planting. Then dig holes for each shrub and backfill with the amended bed soil.

### ***TERMITES***

January is usually the start of termite season. On some warm humid day in January, the first termite swarms usually occur. If you find suspicious small winged insects near or in your home, they could be termites. Remember termites have two sets of equal

sized wings, beaded antennae and the abdomen is broadly joined to the thorax. Termites are often confused with ants, but ants are unrelated and are quite different. Ants have elbowed antennae, two sets of wings of different sizes and the connection between the abdomen is constructed. If you are unable to identify these pests, bring them to me at the Extension Office or call, and we will send literature which should prove helpful.

### **MISC. JANUARY GARDENING**



**Vegetables** - Plant beets, seed asparagus into flats (transplant in May), broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, celery, collards, endive, horseradish, kale, kohlrabi, lettuce, mustard, onion sets, peas, potatoes, radish, rutabagas, spinach, Swiss chard and turnips.

**Pruning** - Now is a good time to prune evergreens and deciduous shoots (e.g. crape myrtles, thryallis) and trees, including deciduous fruit trees. To prune a large branch from a tree do the following: 1) cut the underside of the branch 6-10 inches from the trunk, 2) cut the branch off from the top 15-18 inches from the trunk, and 3) cut the remaining stub off just outside the collar area. This cutting technique will prevent stripping of bark down the trunk of the tree. Make sure the cut is made outside the collar area and not snugly against the trunk. The collar area provides natural protection to the tree trunk from the invasion by insects and disease. It is not necessary to cover the cut with a protectant, other than perhaps an insecticide, such as lindane.

**Transplanting** - If you wish to transplant any shrubs or trees, do so in January. Remember

to dig so that you obtain as big of a root ball as possible. For trees, figure 12-15 inches of root ball for each inch of trunk diameter of the tree. Now is a good time to dig divide, and replant perennials.

**Grapes** - Cut back grape shoots to 4 buds and remove small shoots. For more information on pruning grapes, contact our office and request our bulletin on Muscadine Grapes or Bunch Grapes.

**Ground covers** - It is very difficult to maintain turfgrass under the shade of oak trees. The grass is simply unable to compete with the tree for light and nutrients and will gradually decline over a few years. There are a few shade tolerant ground covers such as Asiatic jasmine, mondo grass, Algerian ivy or English ivy which will grow well under oak trees. Both ivies will climb up the oak trees and will require pruning. Now is a good time to plant these ground covers.

**Soil pH** - Now is a good time to have your soil tested. The Master Gardeners here at the Polk County Extension Office conduct pH analyses once per week for \$3.00. The samples can also be sent to the University of Florida for further testing. Call our office for information.

**Fertilization** - Fertilize annuals and vegetables. Apply 2 lbs. of 6-6-6 or 8-8-8 or similar fertilizer per 100 square feet. A 1 lb. coffee can will hold about 2 lbs. of fertilizer. Fertilize deciduous fruit trees, such as pecans, apples, peaches, nectarines, pears, etc, with a balanced fertilizer containing micro nutrients.

**Perennials** - Any of the bulbs or perennials commonly grown in Florida can be planted in January.

**Master Gardener Calendars** - The Master Gardeners have sold most of their 2001

calendars, however there are a few left. The calendars are full of gardening advise for each month. Call the Extension Office at (863)533-0765 to place an order or use the mail order form that was included in the last Newsletter.

Happy Gardening,

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For gardening information:  
<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>

For Polk County Extension Information  
<http://polk.ifas.ufl.edu>