

Urban Horticulturer

May 2001

April has been a very busy month at the Polk County Extension Office. During the weeks of April 2-6 and 16-20, I was involved with the annual Agrifest which hosts approximately 4,800 Polk County 4th graders.

This is a program sponsored by Farm Bureau in which all the 4th grade students in Polk County are bussed to the Extension Office and



given various programs on Polk County's Agriculture. Each program lasts about 20 minutes and stresses the importance of Agriculture to Polk County. Presentations were given on Citrus, Forestry, Livestock, Beekeeping, an insect presentation from the Division of Plant Industry, Soil and Water Conservation and a phosphate dig sponsored by the Phosphate Industry.

In addition, a presentation on Good Bugs/Bad Bugs in our environment was made at the annual Earth Day Celebration at Bok Tower on April 20th. About 1,500 students, teachers and visitors were in attendance.

April also should have been a busy month for gardeners working on the lawn, shrubs, the vegetable garden, and fruit trees, etc. There certainly was much to do with pruning, fertilizing and planting. It's hard to believe that it is already May. I had every intention of writing an April Newsletter, but I couldn't find the time, so we have to settle for a May Newsletter.

AFRICAN VIOLETS by Mrs. Rita Hilton*

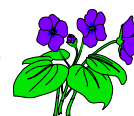
Many of you will either give or receive

America's favorite house plant for Mother's Day on May 13th, an African violet. If you do, then here are a few pointers to help make this gift a long lasting, beautiful gift for months or even years to come.

The single most important factor for good bloom is adequate light. Bright, strong light is desirable, but in Florida, direct mid-day sun will burn the plant. Usually, the best area to place a plant is either an east or north window.

However, a sheer curtain or a large overhang can make a south or west window a satisfactory place. Turning the pots 1/4 turn every few days will help to insure even growth since they will grow toward the light.

Light intensity diminishes the further from the window you get, so do keep the plants as close to window as possible. Most coffee



tables do not offer enough light, so if you want to show off your treasures when you have company, put them there and then move them back to the light source after your guests leave. It is also important that they receive 7-8 hours of darkness. Many of you do not have good natural light. If not, you can use fluorescent lights to supply their needs.

If you seem to have difficulty with keeping your violets alive, usually, it is because you are either over or under watering them. It would be wonderful if you could say all violets should be watered once a week, but actually there are several things that determine how often. The size of the plant and the density of the soil are the most common ones. The safest rule is to feel the soil, and only water when it begins to dry out. You should

not use water which has gone through a water softening system on any house plants.

You may water from the top, bottom or by wicks. If you water from the top, try not to get water in the center of the plant. You may choose to water from the bottom by placing your plants in a saucer and adding water. Leave your plant in the water in the saucer only for about 15 or 20 minutes. Never allow plants to stand in water after the soil has taken up what it can hold. Plants get air not only through foliage but also through the roots, so don't over-water. You may also choose to wick water. You can do this by placing a string through one of the holes in the bottom of the pot and putting it then on a reservoir.

Fertilizing and watering can go hand in hand. A constant feed will give you the best results both in blooming and plant growth. You may do this by using a water soluble, bloom booster type fertilizer, such as a 15-30-15, at the rate of 1/4 teaspoon to a gallon of water. You can take an empty gallon jug and put 1/4 teaspoon of fertilizer in it along with a gallon of water. Store it in the utility room, closet or some other such place, then each time you water your plants you should use this solution to do so. It is important that you do not overfeed.

Violets enjoy the same temperatures that people do - 65 to 80 degrees. Slightly higher and lower temperatures will be tolerated for short periods of time. Air circulation is desirable but chilling drafts will damage plants. Good humidity is beneficial but in Florida a lack of it is almost never a problem.

Potting soil for African violets should be light and porous. When potting you should not pack the soil around the plant. Also it does not matter what kind of pot you choose to use. Just remember that a clay pot will loose moisture much faster than plastic and will probably need to be watered more often. Violets should be slightly root bound to

bloom, therefore you should not over pot. The size of the pot should be approximately 1/3 the size of the plant.

Again the most important aspects of African violet growing have been mentioned in this article. If you want to have bloom they need adequate lighting. The best way to kill one is to either love it to death by over watering or to neglect it by under watering. Pay attention to these two aspects primarily, and you should have a plant which you can enjoy and of which you can be proud. Happy Violeting !!!!!

*Rita is a long time resident of Bartow and is a Polk County Master Gardener. She has won many awards for her outstanding African violet plants. She also assists her mother with raising orchids. If you have any questions concerning African violets, you can call Rita at the Polk County Cooperative Extension Office (533-0765).

TURFGRASS

Turfgrass Variety - As far as I know there aren't any new drought tolerant turfgrass cultivars on the market which are decidedly better than the currently available cultivars. There have been advertisements for zoysiagrass calling it the miracle grass. Zoysia is a good turf, but it has its good points and bad points like all turfgrasses. Bahiagrass is still the most drought tolerant turfgrass currently available. Research is being conducted by the University of Florida on two new cultivars - one is called seashore paspalum and the other is an obscure cultivar of zoysia grass called seashore zoysia or J-14. I will keep you updated on any new cultivars available for homeowners.

Jasmine vs. Turf

As you may have read in the Lakeland Ledger, there is a ground cover called Asiatic jasmine. It is also called dwarf Confederate jasmine or small leaf Confederate jasmine. Unlike Confederate jasmine and star jasmine, Asiatic jasmine is a true ground cover as its numerous prostrate stems blanket the ground, forming a thick mat. It does not produce a noticeable flower and cannot be grown from seed. It is not a native grass and is not a new plant in Florida as it has been around for decades.



Asiatic jasmine is much more drought tolerant than most turfgrasses, is cold tolerant, is shade tolerant (grows in full sun, but prefers some shade), and grows in most soils lower than pH 8.0. It has very few pest problems and once established requires monthly irrigation only in extreme droughts. It requires fertilization and mowing only once per year after establishment. When NOT actively growing it is quite tolerant of Roundup herbicide applications. It can be sprayed with a low rate of Roundup (1 oz/gal) to kill any weeds and not be damaged; however, when once established weeds are rarely a problem.

Will Asiatic jasmine be an adequate replacement for turfgrass? Since it is vine-like and forms a mat of growth 12 inches or more in height, it is not as easy to walk in as turf. Asiatic jasmine is a good choice in areas that don't have much traffic but still need to be maintained. Asiatic jasmine is an excellent choice for areas under oak trees in which normal turf will not grow well. By using Asiatic jasmine whenever possible, fertilizers, pesticides and especially irrigation would be greatly reduced. Normal turf would be the likely choice in high traffic areas, children's play areas and lawns for sports activities.

Currently Asiatic jasmine is usually available

in 1 gallon pots, so it would be a big and expensive job to plant an entire yard from containers and would require several months for total coverage. The University of Florida Research Center in Apopka is conducting research on growing Asiatic jasmine so it can be harvested, shipped, and installed like turf sod - as 1 x 2 foot slabs. This would eliminate the intensive and expensive labor of installing containers, and provide instant coverage like turf sod. I will keep you updated on the progress of this project.

MISC. MAY GARDENING

Poinsettias - If you want attractive, compact poinsettia plants that will produce many blooms, you must prune regularly during spring and summer. When the shoots are 10-12 inches long, cut them back leaving four leaves on each shoot. New shoots will develop from each pruning point. When these reach 10-12 inches prune again. Continue to prune throughout the summer, but don't cut shoots back after September 10th.

Pruning after September 10th may reduce flowering.



Poinsettias need fertilizer three times per year. When growth starts in the spring, again in June and again in late October or early November. Use about a quarter of a cup of 6-6-6 evenly distributed around the base of each plant and water lightly. A teaspoon of epsom salts (magnesium sulfate) along with the fertilizer may prove helpful. Usually insect and disease problems are not severe, but if necessary, can be corrected with locally available products.

Citrus - Watch for aphids and sooty mold, as both are likely to be on citrus this time of year. Use a dish washing soap, with a low concentration of degreasers, or an insecticide such as malathion for sucking insect control.

Water Conservation in the Landscape -

Maintain a 3-4 inch of mulch in all plant beds to hold moisture and control weeds. Install micro sprinklers near trees and shrubs. If you don't have micro sprinklers, then use soaker hoses in plant beds. Increase the mowing height of turf to the highest level. Use fertilizers that have 30-50% water insoluble nitrogen. Add organic matter to sandy soils prior to planting to increase water retention. Delay plantings until the rainy season starts. Control weeds that compete for water. Remove poor quality plants that use water needlessly.

Crape Myrtle - Watch for powdery mildew and aphids. Myclobutanil seems to work well for control of powdery mildew on crape myrtle and is locally available. Various insecticidal soaps work well for control of aphids.

Flowering Plants - Celosia, coleus, calliopsis, crossandra, exacum, gaillardia, hollyhock, impatiens, kalanchoe, marigold, moss rose, nicotiana, ornamental pepper, pentas, salvia, torenia, verbena, and zinnia all can be planted in May.

Vegetables - A few vegetable crops can be planted in May - Southern peas, okra and sweet potato. If you don't plant summer vegetables, you may want to solarize your garden area to at least partially control nematodes, fungi and weeds before making your Fall planting. Call the Extension Office for specific details on soil solarization.

Insect Pests - Be watching for chinch bugs in St. Augustine turf - Carefully check any suspicious areas. The adults are small (1/8 inch) and black with silver wings. The nymphs are red with a white strip across their backs. Treat only infested areas with an approved insecticide. Thrips and aphids may be on your roses. Watch for caterpillars on your favorite plants and use a biological insecticide such as B.t. for their control.

Azaleas - It appears that lace bugs have been heavy this year. They make a little white stipule or white spot on the top of the leaf and you will find shiny black spots on the under sides of the leaves which are fecal deposits. Check with the Extension Office for current control recommendations. Now is the time of the year to prune azaleas. You can use some of the cuttings to start new plants.

Epcot Flower and Garden Festival - If you get a chance, visit the Epcot Flower and Garden which has been going on since April 20th and will last until June 3rd. I will be giving a fifteen minute presentation on Potted Gardening on May 26th at 1:30 and 4:30 p.m. The Master Gardeners will have a booth that same day and will be answering gardening questions from 11:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m.. Hope to see you there.



Master Gardeners - Master Gardener volunteers conduct soil pH testing every Thursday for a fee of \$3.00. Before doing any new planting you should check the soil pH.

Have a good gardening day,

David Shibles
Environmental Horticulturist
Polk County

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

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

