

# POLK COUNTY URBAN HORTICULTURER

April 2003

## HAPPY EASTER

This year, as always, Easter lilies will be at the top of the list for Easter gift flowers. When the flowers fade, the plant may be set outside, watered, fertilized and allowed to grow and develop a new bulb. After the top dies down in late July, the bulb can be stored in a plastic bag, until October or November. It then can be planted and grown again for next Easter.



Easter lilies do well when planted in the ground. So, if you prefer, when the blooms are gone, you may set the plants in the ground immediately or wait until the stem and leaves have died back in the summer. Take care of the plant as you would any of your ornamentals when it comes to watering and fertilizing. Be sure to plant it in a well drained location. Bulbs in locations that are continually wet will rot.

## CONSERVING WATER

We should all be giving serious thought about reducing water use. Florida's fresh water supply is limited, and our exploding population is putting ever increasing pressure on this finite supply. It's up to all of us to practice water conservation. Last year and so far this year we have had abundant rainfall, however as we pass into non El Nino years, the rains could significantly decrease.

As home gardeners, we should make it a point to use only as much water in the landscape as we absolutely need. If we waste water now, we may have to face serious restrictions in the future.

**Water restrictions** - At the current time, residents of Polk County with even number addresses may water on Tuesdays and/or Saturdays. Odd numbered homes may water on Wednesdays and/or Sundays. Watering must be accomplished before 10:00 a.m. and after 4:00 p.m. Low volume irrigation may be used on non-lawn areas any day of the week, but must adhere to the before 10:00 a.m. or after 4:00 p.m. times. New plant material including turf may be watered on any day for up to 60 days after installation.

**Organic matter** - Improving the water holding capacity of the soil is one important way to conserve water. Most Florida soils are sandy, and don't hold water very well. Applying generous amounts of organic materials, such as compost, manures, and cover crops will increase the water holding capacity of the soil. Every year over 50,000 tons of yard waste are hauled to the Polk County Landfill. Much of this could be composted and put back into the soil in our own yards.

**Irrigation on lawns** - Irrigation systems are easily damaged during lawn maintenance activities and the damages often go unnoticed. The irrigation system then runs early in the morning on irrigation days and no one notices that it is malfunctioning. So, the homeowner needs to check his system occasionally to make sure it is working properly. Check the output with coffee cans or some similar container not with the naked eye.

As a rule of thumb, St. Augustinegrass needs ½ to ¾ inch water twice per week during hot dry periods and once per week when the weather is cooler. Generally ½ inch of water

will wet the St. Augustine root zone which is about 8-10 inches deep. Any less than ½ inch will encourage the roots to grow close to the surface and make the turf more susceptible to drought damage. Any more than about ¾ of an inch will wet beyond the root zone and carry nutrients out of reach of the roots and into the aquifer.

**Irrigation on shrubs** - Most shrubs can be established if they are watered 2-3 times per week for the first several months. After establishment some shrubs demonstrate their need for water by wilting. If they continue to wilt during the evening, and it doesn't rain, they should be watered the following morning. Azaleas are typical of a plant that wilts very quickly during hot dry periods. Carefully inspect azaleas in your landscape for wilting, because azaleas will not take severe wilting for more than a few days before serious injury starts to occur.

Many shrubs show no early symptoms of drought stress. If drought conditions continue, however, they may exhibit injury symptoms such as leaf drop and/or browning of leaf margins, so the damage is already beginning to occur. I don't have a specific formula that I can give you as to when to water these plants. The University of Florida is currently attempting to secure a million dollar grant to help answer this question. It is uncertain if this question can be categorically answered.



The best advice we can offer is to gain experience with these plants and develop a feeling for what happens when you don't water for a certain number of days, taking into consideration weather and soil type. It's tricky because the viburnums on the north side of your house may have different water requirements than the ones on the south side. As a rule of thumb, I would say that you

rarely need to water established shrubs in the winter time, water in the spring when you don't have rain from a few days to a week, water rarely in the summer, and water in the fall as you do in the spring. Sadly, a lot of water is probably wasted on shrubs, because the homeowner is unsure if the plant needs water.

## MULCH

Mulches enhance root growth, reduce soil temperature fluctuations, prevent packing and crusting of the soil, minimize runoff and soil erosion, conserve moisture, help control weeds, and add to the beauty of the landscape by providing a cover of uniform color and an interesting texture to the surface. Keep the mulch 2-3 inches away from the stems of the plants and 2-3 inches deep. When placed against the stem, the high-moisture environment of the mulch increases the chances of stem rot, which can result in plant death.

When mulching an individual shrub planted in the lawn, cover an area at least two times wider than the planting hole. This will help the plant to establish more quickly by reducing competition from turfgrass. When mulching a shrub bed, cover the entire area of the bed.

There are a number of mulches available to the homeowner including pine bark chips, eucalyptus, cypress mulch, hardwood chips, pine needles, oak leaves, yard debris and several others. The University of Florida does not recommend using cypress mulch because much of this product comes from the straight cutting and chipping of cypress trees.

Unfortunately, melaleuca mulch (also called Florimulch) is still not being carried by any garden centers in Polk County and I don't know the reason. University of Florida

research indicate that chipped and composted melaleuca wood makes an excellent mulch and is the least attractive of all wood mulches to termites. The melaleuca tree is a invasive weed tree in central and south Florida that needs to be removed from our environment.

Wilcox Nursery (727) 595-2073) in Indian Rocks Beach is the only source I know of in the Tampa Bay area for Florimulch. It sells for 2.49 per bag. The product is available in truckload lots from the producer, Forestry Resources, located in Fort Meyers-telephone (239) 332-3966. I am hoping that a Polk County garden center will begin to carry this product. The only other option would be for the Polk County Master Gardeners to buy a minimum order (½ truckload) from the processor and sell it to the general public. Let me know if you would be interested in purchasing this product from the Master Gardeners for approximately \$2.25 per bag.

## **WATER CONSERVATION CHECKLIST FOR PART-TIME RESIDENTS**

**By Anne Yasalonis, Florida Yards  
and Neighborhoods Program**

If leaving before April 7, when we “spring forward” make sure irrigation timers are set to reflect Daylight Savings Time and replace the battery in any electronic devices. Lightning can disrupt timers without adequate battery backup and cause your system to water at the wrong time. Remember, local governments are issuing citations for watering at the wrong time of the day.

Do it yourself or have a professional irrigation contractor install an operational rain shut-off device to ensure your irrigation system doesn't come on during summer rains. Set the system to override your controller at ½ half inch of rainfall. Be sure to clean debris from any existing rain shut-off device.

Ask a neighbor or have your lawn and landscape contractor check your irrigation system at least once per month for broken or misdirected heads that waste water and have them fixed to eliminate water waste.

Ask your lawn and landscape contractor to monitor the current water restrictions and reset your irrigation timer if needed.

Turn off water inside the house in case of an unanticipated leak in your absence. You should also turn off your water heater and other water-using appliances to prevent potential problems. If it is a gas water heater, be sure to contact your gas supplier to have the pilot re-lit upon your return.

## **WHAT'S BLOOMING?**

The tree with the beautiful lavender-blue flowers that is now in bloom is the Jacaranda ([Jacaranda minosifolia](#)). You will not see very many of these trees in Polk County probably due to its susceptibility to cold weather. The tree has soft, delicate, fernlike, deciduous foliage and dense terminal clusters of lightly fragrant, trumpet-shaped flowers. The blooms can appear any time from April through August (most often in May), and are sometimes present before the new light green leaves appear in spring. Jacarandas can reach 25 to 40 feet in height with an equal or greater spread, and the trunks are covered with light grey bark. The tree is somewhat cold sensitive (recommended for zone 9b) and can sustain freeze damage, but usually recovers.



## MISC. APRIL GARDENING

**Azaleas** - Watch for lacebugs on azaleas. The damage appears as a yellow to white dotting of the upper leaf surface. As the feeding increases, the upper leaf surface takes on a silvery appearance. The adults are about 1/8 inch long with lacy wings and feed from the lower leaf surface. They leave a characteristic shiny black fecal deposit which in time turns brown. They can be controlled with horticultural oil as well as synthetic insecticides including Sevin, Cygon, Diazinon, Orthene and Merit.

Azaleas, camellias, Indian hawthorn and other shrubs flowering on the previous season's growth should be pruned after flowering, but before the end of May. Any later pruning on these plants may effect next year's blooms.

**Flowers to plant** - African daisy, ageratum, aster, balsam, begonia, black eyed Susan, blue daze, browallia, bush daisy, cat's whiskers, celosia, cleome, coleus, coreopsis, cosmos, crossandra, dahlberg daisy, gazania, gaillardia, gerbera, goldenrod, impatiens, Joseph's coat, lantana, lisanthus, marigold, melampodium, Mexican sunflower, moon flower, nicotiana, nierembergia, pentas, periwinkle, porterweed, portulaca, purslane, salvia, sunflower and zinnia.

**Vegetables to plant** - calabaza, cantaloupe, cassava, chayote, cherry tomato, cucumber, dasheen, eggplant, Jerusalem artichoke, jicama, lima bean, malabar spinach, malanga, New Zealand spinach, okra, pepper, Seminole pumpkin, snap beans, squash, Southern peas, sweet potato, tamarillo, yam and yard long bean.

**Herbs to plant** - anise, basil, bay laurel, borage, cardamon, chives, coriander, dill, ginger, lemon balm, oregano, Mexican

tarragon, mint, rosemary, sage, savory, sweet marjoram and thyme.

**Planting in the shade** - There are a number of plants that will grow in the shade under oak trees, such as bromeliads, Algerian ivy, English Ivy, Asiatic jasmine, caladiums, peacock ginger, impatiens, begonias, ferns and philodendrons.

**Citrus** - You should have already made your first citrus fertilizer of the year. Watch for scab fungus, which often is a problem on grapefruit and various tangerine hybrids. Early symptoms are a little cone shaped deformity in the leaf surface. Control with copper sprays. Aphids, scales, whiteflies and mealy bugs can be controlled with insecticidal soaps and oils.

Have a good gardening day,

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For Polk County gardening information:  
<http://polkhort.ifas.ufl.edu>

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