

POLK COUNTY URBAN HORTICULTURER NEWSLETTER

June 2003

TURF

Irrigation - As we move into the hot summer months, your lawn will need ½ to ¾ inch of water each week either through rainfall or irrigation. Watch for dry areas in your lawn which may not wet well or may be out of reach of your sprinklers. Check the problem area for irrigation coverage with flat-sided containers to collect irrigation water. If the area appears to be getting adequate coverage, then the soil in that area may not be wetting well and the irrigation and rainfall are running off to another place. To improve soil wetting, the area can be aerated with a mechanical device or treated with a mild detergent solution, which breaks the soil surface tension and allows better water penetration.

Fertility - Your lawn may be turning somewhat yellow as it runs out of nutrients from the March fertilizer application. In many cases, an application of iron will give you the desired green effect without stimulating excessive foliar growth which encourages insects and diseases and depletes the roots. Use 2 ounces of iron sulfate in 3-5 gallons of water per 1000 square feet. This is a temporary effect lasting 2-4 weeks and may have to be repeated a few times during the summer. If iron does not give the desired effect, then an application of slow release nitrogen, such as Milorganite (16 pounds per 1000 square feet), could be applied.

BROMELIADS

This family of tropical plants has much to offer home gardeners in Florida. Attractive foliage, geometric form, and unusual flowers combine to make bromeliads a favorite plant for use either indoors or outdoors.



Bromeliads are referred to as air plants by many home gardeners. Most are epiphytic, attached to trees and shrubs in their native habitat. However some grow on the ground. Common bromeliads are Spanish moss, ball moss and pineapples. Bromeliads are native to tropical and subtropical regions of the Americas. A large number of the existing 2,000 species were discovered in Brazil, Peru, and Mexico.

Bromeliads vary greatly in mature size, but their rosette, cut-like form remains fairly constant for most of the decorative types. Foliage of the plants vary in that some have scales, spots, stripes and spines. The thick, stiff leaves assist the plants to adapt and thrive in the adverse temperatures and low humidity of home interiors. Many species produce magnificent, colorful flower bracts and berries on long spikes that last for months.

They grow best in a very organic porous medium. Soil mixes of peat moss, shredded pine bark, sand and tree fern fiber create an environment favorable for root systems. Any

type of container may be used as long as the pot has drainage holes. Bromeliads may also be attached to driftwood, tree fern fiber or trees. It is a good idea to wrap sphagnum moss around the roots to maintain a desirable humid environment near the root zone.

Bromeliads may also be planted directly in the landscape. Select a semi-shaded location and provide a good mulch of oak leaves, pine straw or bark. The most desirable effect is achieved when many plants are grouped together to form a bed of irregular shape.

Fertilize once per month with a soluble fertilizer such as Miracle Gro. Watering is not very complicated. Most species in cultivation have a rosette of leaves with overlapping leaf bases that form a vase at the bottom of the plant. Just refill the vase when the water level is low or empty.

Most bromeliads cannot stand temperatures lower than forty degrees F. However several cold tolerant species are available. All Dyckia, Hectia and Ananas, most Neoregelia species, and a few Aechmea, Vriesea and Billbergia species reportedly will tolerate zone 9b temperatures.

In native habitats, some bromeliads grow in full sun, others do best under light shade and some require almost full shade for best growth. It is therefore almost impossible to select a general light level for bromeliads. However, most species will perform satisfactorily in semi-shaded locations.

The life of a bromeliad is relatively short, but offsets are produced more or less continuously to renew a planting. An offset may grow two or more years before flowering. Offsets can be removed from mother plants after they are 6-8 inches long. The cut surface should be allowed to dry before potting.

COMPOSTING

By Anne Yasalonis - Florida Yards and Neighborhood Program

Composting is a great way to practice recycling in your yard. It has been estimated that you can reduce your total annual volume of waste by 35% if you practice home composting. Most people have all the elements they need to create a successful compost pile without purchasing a bunch of fancy equipment. Kitchen waste along with yard waste make a great mix for your compost pile.



There are many methods of composting and there is one that will fit your needs. Whether you have a small yard, a large yard or live in a deed-restricted community, there is a method for you. Basic knowledge of how the process works will ensure your success in creating usable compost.

Your compost pile requires five basic elements to work. They include adequate moisture (adding water with a hose or bucket to your pile), aeration and oxygen (turning the pile), pile temperature (not so important if you want a slow pile), particle size (less than two inches so that the material can break down quickly) and carbon to nitrogen ratio. The carbon to nitrogen ratio often seems like the most confusing part to get right, but if you know you are adding a “brown” (high carbon material like leaves, branches or paper), add a “green” (high nitrogen material like grass clippings, fruit waste or coffee grounds) as well.

Practicing the “art of composting” is rewarding to both the environment and to your landscape. Your plants will appreciate all the wonderful nutrients the compost will give them. If you would like more information on home composting, please

contact the Florida Yards and Neighborhoods program at the Polk County Extension Service. You may also find valuable composting information at: <http://www.compostinfo.com>.

NEMATODE CONTROL

Most of the sandy soil in central Florida is infested with various species of nematodes. Nematodes are small round worms which are not visible to the naked eye and infest and cause serious injury to most vegetables, turf and landscape plants. The homeowner has very few control options for nematodes.

The homeowner does have one option which is effective and inexpensive. It is called soil solarization. To start the process, work in organic matter, such as composted manure, into the problem area, then level the area as if getting ready to plant. After leveling, cover the area with a thin, clear polyethylene film. The thinner the plastic film the better as more solar energy will pass through thinner plastic. Lay a few lengths of PVC pipe over the plastic sheet to act as a spacer and then cover with another layer of plastic film. Use soil or some heavy object to hold the edges of the plastic film in place.

Allow the film to stay in place for several weeks. The tilled, moist ground under the film will reach temperatures over 120 degrees F. and will kill nematodes, fungi and weed seeds in the upper soil profile. The double layer of plastic film will act as insulation and help maintain higher soil temperatures. When ready to plant remove the plastic film, but do not disturb the soil, except to plant. Disturbing the soil after solarization could bring diseases, nematodes and weed seeds to the surface.

CARPENTER ANTS

I continue to receive many calls concerning carpenter ants in homes. These are large ants,

particularly the winged females, which may be up to 3/4 of an inch long. The head and thorax are ash brown to rusty orange and the abdomen is black. The workers vary in size from 1/4 to 1/2 inch. These ants do not sting like fire ants, but the workers can bite and spray formic acid for defense. They like to feed on meats and sweets.



If you find large winged female ants inside your home, there probably is a nest somewhere within the structure. However, if you only see a few foraging workers in your house, then they may be coming from an outside nest. The workers can travel up to 100 feet or more from a nest inside the house to a nest outside the house.

Homeowners, after seeing these ants in the home, often become very concerned that they are causing structural damage. Unlike the wood-damaging black carpenter ant found in the Florida panhandle, Florida carpenter ants (the ones we have here in Polk County), seek either existing voids in which to nest or excavate only soft materials such as rotten or pithy wood and styrofoam. Bits of debris, called frass (dead ants and pieces of rotten wood), are often ejected from nesting sites.

Outside nesting sites include old termite galleries, rotting tree stumps, holes in tree trunks, behind old boots on palms, under bark, in roots of trees especially citrus, old wooden fences, sheds, bamboo poles, debris of almost any kind, under mulch, in soil under shrubs (the ants feed on honey dew from aphids and scales), in railroad ties, old shoes, walls or support pillars, under stones, and in home exterior coverings, especially wood panels.

Common indoor nesting sites include wall voids, under attic insulation near the eaves where they are difficult to reach, under bath tubs, under windows and door frames which

have moisture leaks, around skylights, in boxes or paper bags, in unused closets, in appliances especially dishwashers, flat roofs, behind wood panels, in wood furniture, cracks in floors, under bathroom fixtures, electrical boxes and hollow supports of patio screens.

Carpenter ants, like many other ants will travel along wires, cables or fences that may be attached to the house and serve frequently as access routes for them to enter attics and other above ground areas. Tall trees touching structures also provide an excellent access route for the ants to enter buildings.

The best method to control carpenter ants is to locate and destroy the nest. Carpenter ant workers begin to forage just after dark. Go outside after dark with a flashlight, find a trail of carpenter ant workers, follow the trail back to the nest, then thoroughly spray the nest with an insecticide. If the ants are entering the house through a crack, then the opening can be plugged with caulking compound. Residual sprays can be made to areas where they are foraging and shrubs can be treated to kill aphids and scales.

If the nest is in the house, then as on the outside, it must be found and treated to solve the problem. Carpenter ants don't like to be disturbed so pounding on a wall void or on rafters in the attic will often disturb them. When disturbed, they make a rustling sound which will give away their location and it can be treated.

Bait treatments normally do not work too well for control of carpenter ants because they are finicky eaters and don't recruit large numbers of other workers to a food source as do sugar ants. Lastly, the homeowner can call a Pest Control Operator. Be advised that most companies have a special fee for carpenter ant control.

Flowers to plant - Angelonia, begonias, bush daisy, butterfly plant, caladium, cat's whiskers, celosia, coreopsis, coleus, Dahlberg daisy, fire spike, four o'clock, gaillardia, gerbera daisy, ginger, goldenrod, impatiens, kalanchoe, lantana, marigolds, melampodium, Mexican sunflower, moon flower, nierbergia, porterweed, pentas, periwinkle, portulaca, purslane, salvia, shrimp plant, Stokes aster, sunflower, torenia and zinnias.

Vegetables to plant - Boniato, calabaza, chayote, cherry tomatoes, dasheen, malanga, okra, roselle, Southern peas, Seminole pumpkin, sweet casava, sweet potatoes and yard long beans.

Herbs to plant - Anise, basil, bay laurel, chives, dill, ginger, marjoram, mint, oregano, sage and thyme.

Have a good gardening day,



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MISC. JUNE GARDENING