

POLK COUNTY URBAN HORTICULTURER NEWSLETTER

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TURF

Irrigation - During the winter months, turf does not need a lot of water, however as long as the soil temperatures are in the 50's F. or higher the roots continue to grow and need some additional water. If you are unsure when to water, check for moisture by sticking your finger up to the first joint into the soil, as you would for potted plants.

As a rule of thumb, turfgrass should not need to be irrigated more than once every 2-3 weeks - less often when you have rainfall. Always keep an eye on the weather forecasts, because approaching cold fronts often bring rainfall which reduces the need for irrigation. Be sure not to over-water your turfgrass, because you may end up with many winter weeds such as wild geranium, sow thistle, Florida betony, toadflax and particularly dollarweed. These weeds all like a lot of water and effectively out-compete your turfgrass during the winter.



Grassy weeds - Basically the best way to control lawn weeds is to promote healthy turf by proper fertilizing, mowing, and irrigating. However, if your lawn weeds are hopelessly out of control, then herbicides may be the only answer.

Since Asulox was taken off the homeowner market, controlling annual grassy weeds, like crabgrass and Alexandergrass in turfgrass, have become major problems. I don't have any news about the possible return of Asulox to the homeowner market.

Baking soda can be used to kill mature plants, like crabgrass, Alexandergrass, Florida pusley and probably others. Wet the plants and sprinkle the powder directly on the leaves. In a few days, you should see the weeds beginning to die. You may see some damage to St. Augustinegrass when temperatures are high in the summer. Use baking soda with caution, because we are unsure of any possible effects it may be having on the soil.

About the only chemical option for grassy weed control in turf is to use pre-emergence products like Halts (pendimethalin) or a combination product like Treflan and Balan (trifluralan and bifenox). These products kill the germinating seed so adequate quantities of the herbicide must be in the ground when the seeds germinate.

In central Florida, the recommended time to make an application of a pre-emergence herbicide for control of grassy weeds is mid-February - the estimated time crabgrass starts to germinate. Other annual grassy weeds, like basketgrass and goosegrass, may germinate a little later than crabgrass. Some

recommendations call for a second pre-emergence herbicide application toward the end of April or the first of May which may help control later germinating grassy weed seeds. Halts and other crabgrass killers are available in most retail garden centers. The Treflan and Balan combination is available at Petersons's Nursery in south Lakeland.

Atrazine has been successfully used in St. Augustinegrass as a preemergence and postemergence herbicide for broadleaf weed control for many years. It can be applied twice per year - once in late winter (February) and again before April 15th or it can be applied in the fall for control of dollarweed. It should not be applied at a time of the year when the maximum temperature rises above 85° F.

I don't know the current status of atrazine as a herbicide in St. Augustinegrass for homeowners in Florida. The EPA has been studying this product for some time because of its residual properties. It also has been found to cause physiological defects in certain frogs. It may eventually be removed from the homeowner market. Currently Atrazine is available in "weed and feed products" which the UF does not recommend and as low percentage granules for spot treatment control of broadleaf weeds.

Fertilization - The first recommended fertilizer application should be in March when the St. Augustinegrass begins to green-up, not in February. The University of Florida recommends applying fertilizers and herbicides separately - herbicides in February and fertilizer in March in central Florida. When using a "weed and feed" product the amount of fertilizer and herbicide are often put down at the wrong time and at incorrect rates. In addition, when fertilizers and herbicides are mixed together the whole lawn must be treated which may not be necessary and excess fertilizer and/or herbicide may leach down into the aquifer or run off into waterways.

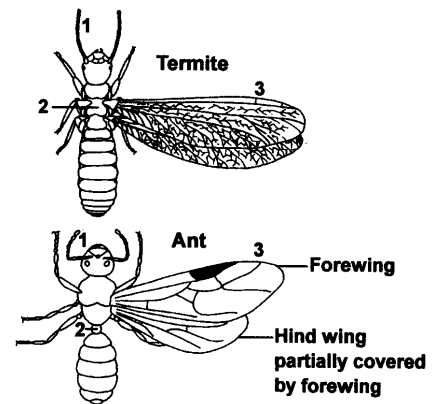
TERMITES

Now is the time of the year for swarming of subterranean termites. As with ants, winged termite male and females have mating flights. During the mating flight, the termites eventually land, drop their wings and pair off. The King and Queen start a new colony by excavating a small chamber in a crevice or in soft soil. They mate and the Queen starts laying eggs.

Ants vs. termites - Unlike ants where the male dies soon after mating, the male and female termites mate for life which may be over 20 years depending on the species. The female can produce thousands to millions of eggs during her lifetime. These eggs develop into workers, soldiers, and nymphs which eventually become the next generation of swarmers.

Termites are often mistaken for ants. Ants and termites do have superficial similarities, but can

easily be distinguished by their antennae (1), the waist (2), the body hardness and the wings (3). Ant antennae are bent in the middle, or elbowed. The antennae on the termite are like a strand of beads, with no bend in the middle. The ant has a very tight constriction between the thorax and the abdomen forming a very small waist. The termite has no constriction and is "thick-waisted". Ant forewings are larger than the hindwings while termite wings are of a similar size. Finally ant bodies are very hard while termites have very soft bodies are easily crushed.



Swarming termites - It would not be unusual

for a homeowner to see a swarm of termites arising from someplace in his yard or to find termite workers in a mulched bed. Termites are just about everywhere in the landscape feeding on anything containing cellulose from discarded wood to mulch, even cardboard. Finding termites in your yard does not mean that your house is infested or will become infested. However, to be on the safe side, you may want to call a reputable pest control company for a free inspection. If the inspectors don't find termites or termite damage inside your house, you will have to decide if you want to spend the money for a preventive termite treatment. It's kind of like buying an insurance policy.

On the other hand, if you find swarming termites in your house, then you probably have an infestation somewhere inside the house. A good-sized termite colony eats about one pound of wood per day. In this case, you definitely need to call in a professional to find the infestation and identify the type of termite - subterranean or drywood. This is very important because the treatments for subterranean and drywood termites are totally different. Make sure that you collect specimens with wings or just the wings. Get 2-3 estimates from reputable companies.

Homeowner remedies - Homeowners can discourage the presence of subterranean termites around the house in several ways: 1) keep mulch, even fine rocks, out away from the foundation of the house as they encourage moisture retention; 2) direct sprinklers out away from the house; 3) keep landscape plants out away from the house as termites can follow the roots in under the foundation; 4) make sure hose bibbs are not leaking; 5) do not leave any type of wood or cardboard laying on the ground in the yard; 6) keep outside siding above the soil line exposing concrete block, so that you can see any mud tubes being formed by invading termites (termites construct and travel in these protective tubes above ground often behind

below-grade siding); 7) watch for the formation of mud tubes in all parts of your house particularly along the expansion joints inside garages along walls and 8) use pressure treated wood for any project in which the wood touches the ground or some other type of termite-proof material like Trexx.

There are a few homeowner chemical treatments for termite protection that can be purchased from retail garden centers. One is in the form of an insecticidal drench

which can be poured into a trench dug around the foundation of the house. Another is the use of bait stations which can be installed in the ground around the foundation of the house similar to the Sentricon System. These homeowner treatments may work to some degree, but the homeowner is not going to be able to place the product(s) in all necessary places in sufficient quantities to do an adequate job.

Post construction commercial subterranean termite control - The question I'm often asked is "Which commercial termite control system is best?" There are basically two systems. One is the bait treatment system like The Sentricon System and the second is the boring and trenching system with products like Termidor.

Bait systems utilize traps containing treated wood which are placed in the ground at strategic points around the house (about every 10 feet). Termites are drawn to the treated wood which they eat and take back to the nest site. The poison is distributed throughout nest and the termite colony eventually dies. This is a very non-invasive type of treatment, but it may take up to a year to get rid of the termites. In the mean-time they continue to



feed.

The trenching and boring technique is more invasive, but probably gets to the live termites more quickly. With this treatment type, each block around the foundation of a house is drilled. Insecticide is then injected into the voids of the block and then into the soil under the concrete pad. In areas where there are walkways against walls, the walkways are drilled vertically and insecticide is injected underneath. Finally, a trench is dug around the foundation of the house and the insecticide is drenched into the trench and covered up.

With the newer chemicals like Termidor, the termites unknowingly pick up the chemical on their bodies as they pass through treated areas and carry it back to the nest. As they groom each other in the nest, they ingest the poison and die.

So, which system is better? They both have good points and bad points and both systems have failures. The bait system is usually effective and is very non-invasive, but takes a long time to work. The boring/trenching system also usually works well, but is very invasive. Sometimes, even the inside concrete floor needs to be drilled so that certain unprotected areas can be treated. Contractors try to plug the drill holes, but the holes are often not well matched. Ideally, the best system may be a combination of the bait and drilling systems - some companies do this, but cost is greater.

Guaranties - Also of importance, is the guarantee. Some company guaranties only call for retreating your house if it should become infested or re-infested with termites. The contract does not cover any new termite structural damage to your home after treatment.

Other company guaranties will cover the cost of repairs from any new termite damage after treatment; however, you will be charged an

annual inspection fee. The annual fees can amount to a few hundred dollars, but you will be assured that any new termite damage will be repaired at no cost to you. Carefully read the contract before signing on the line!

MISC. FEBRUARY GARDEN

Vegetables to plant - We are rapidly running out of time for planting cool season vegetables. You can still plant beet, broccoli, carrots, cauliflower, celery, collards, endive, kohlrabi, lettuce, mustard, pea, potato, radish and turnip for the next couple of



weeks. Later in the month, plant beans, cantaloupe, corn, cucumber, eggplant, luffa, pepper, pumpkin, squash, tomato, and watermelon. Keep in mind it is still possible to get a freeze in later February and early March.

Flowers to plant - Alyssum, aster, baby's breath, begonia, candytuft, carnation, calendula, coneflower, coreopsis, cosmos, dahlia, delphinium, dianthus, dusty miller, false heather, four o'clock, gaillardia, gaura, gazania, geranium, gerbera, godetia, Johnny-jump-up, lobelia, nasturtium, pansy, petunia, rose, salvia, snapdragon, Stoke's aster, sweet pea, veronica and yarrow.

Herbs to plant - Anise, basil, borage, chives, dill, fennel, lemon balm, mint, oregano, parsley, rosemary, sage, sweet marjoram, tarragon and thyme.

Pruning crape myrtles - I should mention that the University of Florida is currently conducting a research trial on crape myrtle pruning. We only have preliminary results

right now, but they are finding that *pollarding* may be a pruning option for crape myrtles. A new circular should be posted on the EDIS Web Site sometime this year.

With the pollarding technique, the crape myrtles are cut back to the same place each year. This could be a height that you can easily reach without a step ladder. Eventually a large knob develops at the point where the pruning is done. The University researchers are finding that very little decay develops in these knobs. This is a different look which has been popular for years in Europe on sycamore trees, but it may be one you don't like.

Pollarding may be an option which you can consider for your crape myrtles, but I think no pruning at all other than removing a few suckers, dead branches and old seed heads will still be the best choice. You should not have to reduce the



height of your crape myrtle at all, if you plant the right sized cultivar in the right place. The next best choice will probably still be pencil pruning back to a point along the stem up to an inch in diameter. I will keep you posted.

Native trees to plant - It is a great time in Florida to plant trees. Arbor Day in Florida is the third Friday in January. There are so many tree selections that it can be overwhelming when it comes to choosing a few to plant in your yard. Always remember to plant the right tree in the right place!

Sycamore trees are large native trees often seen planted in street medians or along roadsides. This is because they are tough! This fast growing tree is best for a large yard because it can reach 150' in height. The beautiful peeling bark is one of its best

attributes.

Red Maples are a great specimen tree for a large yard. They will grow to about 70' tall and grow particularly well in moist sites. Red Maples have gorgeous red leaves in the fall prior to leaf drop.

Fringetree is a great choice if you have a small yard. It will grow to about 30' tall and is covered with white blooms in the spring.

River Birch is another fast growing tree that makes a great specimen in your landscape. It can reach 40-80' in height and does best in moist soils. The white peeling bark and multi-trunk form make it a great addition to any landscape.

For more information on native trees to plant in your yard contact the Florida Yards and Neighborhoods program at the Polk County Extension Service.

Have a good gardening day,

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