

POLK COUNTY URBAN HORTICULTURER NEWSLETTER

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Dear Reader: This is short notice, but I will be presenting a free Saturday morning program on March 26th at 9:00 a.m. at the Extension Office (1702 Hwy. 17 South, Bartow). The program topic is “Diagnosing Lawn Problems”. I hope to see some of you here. I will be available to answer questions and look at any plant problems, which you care to bring, after the program.

TURF



Fertilizer - Now is the recommended time to fertilize your turf. Before buying fertilizer, if you have not already done so, I encourage you to have your soil tested by the University of Florida Soil Laboratory to determine the concentration of phosphorous. The test costs \$7.00 and will also give you the levels of calcium, magnesium and potassium plus pH along with fertilizer recommendations.

If the test shows a medium to high level of phosphorous, which is quite likely, buy a fertilizer which contains low or no phosphorous like 15-0-15. Phosphorous is often routinely put into the fertilizer mixture like a 10-10-10 and sold to the homeowner whether he needs it or not in his landscape. It then leaches out of the soil and into our lakes

and streams stimulating a flush of unwanted plant growth.

If you would like a free soil testing kit, which includes a bag for the soil sample, a soil test form and a shipping box, give me a call at the Extension Office. It will take about two weeks to receive the results.

If you already know the concentration of phosphorous, then a pH test may be all that is needed. The Polk County Master Gardeners conduct soil pH tests every Thursday morning for a \$3.00 fee. If you bring your soil sample to the office on Monday through Wednesday, you will have the results and recommendations on Friday.

We also encourage you to use fertilizers which have equal amounts of nitrogen and potassium (first and last numbers) and fertilizers which have 30-50% slow release nitrogen like a 15-5-15 or a 15-0-15 analysis. To determine if a fertilizer has a percentage of slow release nitrogen, look at the nitrogen analysis on the bag. It is usually expressed as the amount of slow release nitrogen or water insoluble nitrogen on the label under nitrogen in the **Guaranteed Analysis** section. Some fertilizer labels will have an asterisk after nitrogen, with the slow release information expressed in a foot note. The Lesco label, for example, indicates in a footnote that a certain

percentage of the nitrogen is coated with Lesco “Poly Plus” sulfur coated urea.

The slow release nitrogen in most of relatively inexpensive turf fertilizers is made by coating fast release urea nitrogen with sulfur. The sulfur coating reduces the speed at which the nitrogen is released into the soil. I encourage you to look at the fertilizer label and select products with slow release properties.

If you are using a fertilizer with slow release nitrogen, apply 1 pound of actual nitrogen per 1000 square feet. However, if your fertilizer does not have slow release nitrogen, reduce the amount to ½ pound per 1000 square feet and apply more often. To determine the amount of fertilizer containing one pound of actual nitrogen, divide 100 by the percent nitrogen in the bag. If the fertilizer has an analysis of 15-5-15, divide 100 by 15 which equals 6.7 pounds. Apply 6.7 pounds of the fertilizer per 1000 square feet of turf if the nitrogen is slow release - 3.4 pounds if the fertilizer is fast release. At one pound per 1000 square feet, a fifty pound bag of fertilizer with 15% nitrogen would cover 7500 square feet.



Weed Control - You should have already applied a preemergence application of a herbicide to kill germinating grassy weed seed, such as crabgrass, in mid-February and if necessary a product such as atrazine to control broadleaf weeds. I recommend that you make the application of Atrazine as spot treatments in problem areas rather than treating the whole lawn. The label allows you to make a second application of atrazine before daytime temperatures reach 85 degrees which is around April 15th in central Florida. It appears that Atrazine 4L (liquid) is still available as I have recently seen it at both Home Depot and Walmart. Atrazine is also available as a granular formulation for spot treatments.

There is still not any effective way to control grassy weed plants in St. Augustine and Bahiagrass lawns, however there are a couple of new postemergence products for control of broadleaf weeds - Spotlight and Quicksilver, but they pose some problems from the standpoint of phytotoxicity and are not available for homeowner use at the present time. However some commercial lawn care professionals are using these products.

As you have heard before, the best weed control in your lawn is to keep it as healthy as possible. This can be accomplished by following proper cultural recommendations such as mowing correctly, fertilizing correctly, and controlling pests and diseases effectively.

Another common mistake which homeowners make is to try to grow turf in the shade of an oak tree. There isn't any turf, even the shade tolerant St. Augustines, which will grow well in the shade of an oak tree having to compete with the tree roots for water and nutrients and the foliage for light. A lawn needs at least 3 hours of full sun to survive.

PRUNING

This is about the right time of the year to start pruning our landscape plants. Keep in mind that most plants do best when they receive a minimal amount of pruning. We often put plants in the wrong place and/or fertilize them so that pruning becomes necessary, like putting a large crape myrtle under the soffit of a house. There is a lot of information on-line and here at the Extension Office about the potential height and width of our common landscape plants. Review this kind of information before buying and planting landscape plants.

As a rule of thumb, do not prune more than 30% of a plant at one time unless you know through experience that the plant will stand to be pruned more severely. Start with the removal of dead or declining limbs. If we happen to have a severe winter, which hasn't happened for some years,

cold sensitive plants like hibiscus, croton, tibouchina, firebush, etc. may be frozen back to major limbs or to the ground. Cut these back to healthy wood. I usually use my thumbnail to make a small incision into the bark. If the inner wood is black or brown, then that part of the branch is probably dead. Keep checking until you find green inner bark and cut back into the green area a few inches.

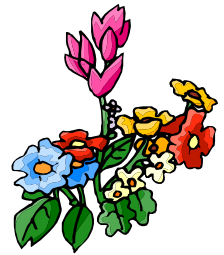
Trees - Make sure the tree is taking on the proper shape. Trees should keep one straight trunk until they reach a height of eight or so feet. You can prune the lower branches about half way back to the trunk which will encourage the main trunk to grow taller. Check the University of Florida web site <http://hort.ifas.ufl.edu> under trees and you will find an extensive amount of literature about tree pruning written by Dr. Ed Gilman.



Unfortunately, I still see palms (not real trees) being pruned improperly. Some people feel that palms need to be hurricane proofed in which most of the fronds are pruned off leaving only a few fronds at the top. This seriously stresses the palm, because palms use the nutrients in the old growth for new growth. Fronds should not be pruned until they are at least 50% necrotic and hanging lower than straight out. Most palms, excluding Queens and Washington, fared much better than trees in the recent hurricanes.

Shrubs - Shrubs are generally kept in a rounded to vase shape. Shrubs should be encouraged to develop several main limbs from the ground or a small trunk. I like to use a technique called drop-crotch pruning in which the shrub is reduced in size by pruning the taller branches 6-12 inches back into the canopy to a lateral branch. If there isn't a lateral branch, then just prune well back into the canopy. This will stimulate the surrounding stems to produce new growth, plus the cut stem will also produce new

growth. The shrub will be reduced in height, creating an informal look and will not need pruning more than once or twice per year. You may need to do a little pruning of rat-tail growth from time to time, which can be done any time of the year and is not real time consuming.



You may want to maintain a formal look with a row of shrubs, but keep in mind this will require regular maintenance for it to look nice. There are two important factors to remember when pruning formal hedges: 1) hedges should be clipped while new growth is green and succulent; and 2) plants should be trimmed so that the base of the hedge is wider than the top. Hedge pruning with a narrow base will lose their leaves and branches shaded by the top.

When Should I Prune? - Most evergreens such as podocarpus, holly, boxwood, ligustrum, juniper and wax myrtles can be pruned any time of the year. However, late summer pruning could stimulate a flush of growth which could be damaged by early cold weather. The best time may be just before new growth in the spring.

Some plants produce flowers on the current season's new growth such as citrus, crape myrtle, croton, fig, grape, hibiscus, juniper, ligustrum, mandevilla, maple, oaks, oleander, plumbago, poinsettia, sweet gum, sycamore, thryallis, tibouchina and viburnum to name a few. These should be pruned while dormant during winter or early spring.

Other plants set their flower buds on the previous season's growth and the buds over winter on this older growth such as azaleas, banana shrub, bottle brush, bougainvillea, Bridal wreath spirea, chaste tree, climbing roses, coral honeysuckle, dogwood, gardenia, hydrangea, Indian hawthorn, Jerusalem-thorn, loropetalum, magnolia, orchid tree, peaches, pears, red bud and Wisteria. These and others like it should be pruned after flowering.

DROUGHT TOLERANT ANNUALS

by Anne Yasalonis, Florida Yards and
Neighborhoods Coordinator

Spring is here, and with that comes the urge to install new plants in your garden. Since spring months tend to be dry, you may want to plant some drought tolerant plants. Annuals are a great way to add color to your garden, but since many annuals tend to use a lot of water, here are some drought tolerant annuals to try out:

1. Cockscomb (*Celosia argentea*): bright spring flowers, likes sandy soil,
2. Cosmos (*Cosmos bipinnatus*): spring and summer blooms, likes dry soil, reseeds,
3. Dusty Miller (*Senecio cineraria*): tolerates heat, does well in very dry or sandy soil,
4. Sweet William (*Dianthus barbatus*): flowers spring, fall and winter, likes sandy soil,
5. Moss Verbena (*Glandularia pulchella*): prostrate grower, drought tolerant, likes sandy soil.

MISC. MARCH GARDENING

Vegetables to plant - Beans, calabaza, cantaloupe, casava, chayote, corn, cucumbers, dasheen, eggplant, Jerusalem artichoke, jicama, luffa, malanga, New Zealand spinach, okra, pepper, pumpkin, southern peas, squash, tamarillo, tomato and watermelon.

Herbs to plant - Anise, basil, bay laurel, borage, cardamon, chervil, coriander, dill, fennel, ginger, lemon balm, sweet marjoram, Mexican tarragon, mint, oregano, rosemary, sage, thyme and watercress.

Flowers to plant - African daisy, ageratum, alyssum, balsam, begonia, black-eyed Susan, blue daze, bush daisy, celosia, cleome, coreopsis, cosmos, dahlia, dahlberg daisy, dusty miller, four o'clock, gaillardia, goldenrod, impatiens, Joseph's coat, licorice

plant, marigold, melampodium, million bells, moon vine, morning glory, nierembergia, salvia, strawflower, torenia, verbena, vinca and zinnia.

Citrus - Fertilize citrus trees under 5 years old with a citrus fertilizer - one pound of a 6-6-6 per year of growth. Watch for insects such as mealy bugs, scales, white flies and aphids. Black sooty mold covering the leaves and stems is a good indication that you have one or more of the above pests. Apply a horticultural oil with a small amount of soap, such as Ivory, to control insect pests. Very often the parasites and predators will keep insects in check. Give them time to work! One application of an insecticide like malathion will kill them.

Citrus diseases, such as scab, melanose, and Alternaria usually do not need treatment. Sometimes Alternaria can be severe on Minneola tangelos (honey bell) causing leaf and fruit drop. This disease, as well as scab, can be controlled with several applications of copper at 2-3 week intervals starting 2-3 weeks after petal fall.

Have a good gardening day,

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For Polk County Gardening Information:
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Polk County Web Site
<http://polk.ifas.ufl.edu>

