

# POLK COUNTY URBAN HORTICULTURER NEWSLETTER

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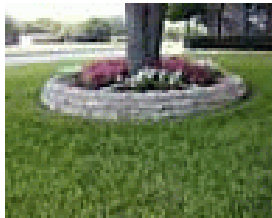
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*Dear Reader, we finally have received a load of melaleuca mulch. Call the office if you would like to place an order - the price is \$2.50 per bag.*

## TURF

### Selecting a turfgrass -

What turfgrass to select is probably one of the most common questions which I receive from homeowners. For one reason or another our lawns tend to develop dead spots which need rejuvenation, or the lawn may need to be entirely replaced. Families building a new home are often asked what type of grass they want. Some people don't like the coarse look of Florida turfgrasses and are looking for some other type of grass, while others want a grass which is the most drought tolerant. The rumor constantly spreads that the University of Florida has recently developed a new drought proof grass - for the time being it's only a future possibility.



St. Augustinegrass is the most popular turf for Florida home lawns. Unfortunately, it is also the most susceptible to drought. St. Augustinegrass, as well as centipedegrass, grow from stolons, which are actually above

ground stems. You have all seen these stem-like runners near the surface of the ground. These above ground stems are very susceptible to drought and will dry-out and die quickly without adequate moisture. These dead areas will only regrow if they are re-sodded or plugged or when the surrounding stolons grow back into the dead area. This may take some time.

Other popular grasses including Bahia, Bermuda, seashore paspalum and zoysia grow from rhizomes. Rhizomes are thick stems which grow deep into the ground and are quite tolerant of moderate drought. During periods without rainfall and/or irrigation, the above ground leaves dry back, but the rhizomes often survive because they are underground and protected by a layer of soil. As soon as the rains or irrigation return, the rhizomes produce new green growth.

Most turfgrasses have at least one or two major pest problems which need management. This is in addition to nematode problems which do not have any homeowner control recommendations. Most all of the warm season turfgrasses can have disease problems under certain conditions. St. Augustinegrass can have major problems with chinch bugs, but not mole crickets. Bahiagrass and Bermudagrass do not usually have chinch bugs, but they can be devastated by mole crickets. We have considerable literature on the good and bad characteristics of warm season turfgrasses.

**Turf site soil conditions** - Before you make a

selection, check out the site where the turf will be growing. Is it very shady? What is the pH of the soil? Is your soil prone to drying out quickly? Are you limited to once per week watering?

If you have naturally high pH (6.5 - 7.0), then Bahiagrass may not be a good selection, as it prefers a pH of 5.5 and it is very difficult to permanently lower naturally high pH. Adding sulfur to lower pH is only a temporary fix, because soil microbes convert the sulfur to sulfuric acid which lowers the pH. However, when the sulfur is gone the soil pH returns to its' natural level.

**pH** - St. Augustinegrass does best at a pH of 6.5. If the pH is low, it can be successfully raised with lime or dolomite. Dolomite is a product which contains lime (calcium) and in addition magnesium. I prefer to use dolomite over lime, because it will raise the pH, plus it will give your soil magnesium which is often low.

**Sunlight** - If you do not have at least 3 hours of good sun per day, then you really should not plant a grass at all even though some turf grasses are somewhat shade tolerant. Shade tolerant choices include grasses such as Delmar and Pursley Seville St. Augustinegrass and Zoysiagrasses. On the other hand, St. Augustinegrass may do quite well in areas which have some shade. Bahiagrass and Bermudagrass both have poor shade tolerance and do best in full sun

**Irrigation** - Bahiagrass is still probably the most drought tolerant grass we have today. As far as I know, none of the various cultivars of St. Augustine are more drought tolerant than any other and all are less drought tolerant than Bahiagrass.

During dry spells in the summer, you should be able to maintain St. Augustinegrass and

Bahiagrass with two irrigations per week. Once per week may be questionable for St. Augustinegrass, particularly if you live up in northeast Polk County, and have a home which was built in an old orange grove on what we call "sugar sand". Bahiagrass should survive with one irrigation event per week.

When you do irrigate, make sure to apply 1/2 to 3/4 inches of water at each application - 3/4 to 1.0 inch in northeast Polk County. UF research indicates that this amount of water will wet soil to a depth of 12 inches. However, it is legal to water so called "hot spots" (wilted areas) in your lawn with a hose any day of the week before 10:00 a.m. or after 4:00 p.m.

## AZALEAS

May is a good time to prune back those azaleas that have gotten a little too big. Azaleas produce flowers on the previous seasons growth, so pruning should not be done after mid-June. As I have mentioned before, I encourage you to use a drop-crotch pruning technique for thinning and height reductions. With this technique, you cut the longer stems 8-10 inches back into the canopy as opposed to hedging the plants with an electric trimmer. This will give the plants a very informal look and will encourage new growth within the canopy.



You can use some of the cuttings to start new plants. Select some of the tips which are turning from green to brown. Cut off an end which is 3-4 inches long. Remove all but the upper most leaves. Dip the stem in a rooting hormone and place 1-2 inches deep in a pot filled with soil. I like to place the cuttings in trays divided into 30-40 cells filled with a potting soil which holds moisture like Hyponex.

Best results are achieved when the trays are kept in a mist chamber until root formation which may take 12-14 weeks. At nurseries, the mist chamber is connected to a timer which turns the water on and off automatically every few minutes during the day, keeping the leaves moist until roots form. Without the additional moisture, most of the leaves would dry up and die. However, with high summer humidity, I have had pretty good luck with cutting survival when I placed the trays in full shade under an oak tree and watered 2-3 times per day. Or, you can make your own simple mist chamber out of plastic wrap and coat hangers. Make sure you label the trays with flower color and cultivar.

## SUMMER ANNUALS

We usually think of annual flowers in terms of a spring or fall garden, because most of the popular varieties need a cool environment for best growth. As you know, the Florida summer heat and humidity are pretty tough on many flower varieties. Marigolds, moss rose, celosia, blue daze, cat's whiskers, coleus, creeping zinnia, fire spike, gomphrena, impatiens, melampodium, pentas and torenia are a few plants that will endure the summer heat.



**Marigolds** - Marigolds come in a variety of colors and sizes. They are among the easiest to care for, because they tolerate drought and pests very well and they thrive in sun or partial shade. They can be grown from seed or from transplants, which are available at almost all garden centers. Seeds sprout in a few days. New varieties bloom in 60 days and continue blooming for several months.

Marigolds are excellent for use as flower borders. The dwarf varieties make an attractive edging for the landscape. They are also useful as cut flowers for indoor decoration. New varieties are continually being developed, so check seed catalogues regularly.

**Portulaca** - Another good choice for the summer garden is the portulaca or moss rose. These small plants form a groundcover of bright rose-like flowers. They come in a variety of colors, including white, yellow, orange, rose and red. The blooms are about an inch or so in diameter, and may grow singly or doubly on the stem. Portulaca is a favorite choice for edgings, borders, rock gardens and window boxes.

Seeds should be planted on a well drained site in full sun. They sprout in a few days and flowers bloom within a few months. The flowers open when they are in full sun, and the plants bloom for only a few weeks. For continuous color all summer, you should plant seeds each month.

Moss rose will not stand much water, so plant in a dry area of the landscape. Moss rose will grow in areas where few others will survive.

**Celosia** - Another popular summer annual is celosia, which is often called cockscomb. Celosia comes in two forms, which the common name suggests - crested and plumed. Both of these grow well in the hot summer months, and both can be planted as seed or transplants.

Celosia seed take about a week or two to germinate, and the plants will bloom when they are about two months old. The flowers range in color from pink and purple to orange, yellow and red. The large crested varieties have flower heads measuring 6-10 inches across. The plumed varieties are very spectacular in form, and provide a dramatic display of garden color, as well as unusual cut flowers. Cockscomb also will work well in dried bouquets.

## MISC. MAY GARDENING

**Vegetables to plant** - Calabaza, chayote, cherry tomatoes, dasheen, malanga, okra, Southern pea, sweet potato and tamarillo.

**Flowers to plant** - Angelonia, balsam, begonias, black-eyed Susan, blue daze, browallia, bush daisy, butterfly weed, cat's whiskers, celosia, coleus, coreopsis, crossandra, Dahlberg daisy, gaillardia, gazania, gerbera, goldenrod, gomphrena, impatiens, lantana, liatris, marigolds, melampodium, moon vine, nicotiana, nierembergia, pentas, periwinkle, porter weed, portulaca, purslane, salvia, sunflowers, torenia, verbena and zinnias.

**Herbs to plant** - Anise, basil, bay laurel, cardamom, chives, coriander, dill, lemon balm, oregano, sage, savory, sweet marjoram, mint, tarragon and thyme.

**Citrus** - It is now time to make the second fertilizer application of the year to trees five years and older. Apply one pound of a citrus fertilizer, such as 6-6-6, per year of age of the tree up to eight pounds per tree per application. Spread the fertilizer evenly under the drip line of the tree. If the fertilizer has a higher analysis, such as a 10-4-10 use a correspondingly lower amount of fertilizer. I noticed recently that Home Depot is selling a 10-4-10 citrus fertilizer with micronutrients - looks pretty good.

I have had a few reports from homeowners lately that one of their citrus trees looked good most of the spring, put out a beautiful bloom, then dropped all of its small fruit and leaves. This is indicative of a disease called Tristeza in which the graft union is destroyed by a virus transmitted by aphids. This disease eventually kills the tree.

**Chinch bugs** - Often become a problem in the same place year after year and are usually

first found in hot dry places along side walks and driveways. Treat the affected area plus 10 feet with a product such as Ortho Max which contains the active ingredient bifenthrin.

**Caladiums** - You can still plant caladiums for color in semi-shady or shady locations. They should be planted in well drained soils with good organic matter content.



**Magnolias** - The leaves turn yellow and many fall to the ground. This happens every spring. The trees will start to look better when new growth resumes.

**Chinch bugs** - May is the month to carefully start watching for signs of chinch bugs in St. Augustinegrass. Chinch bugs attack almost, if not all of the varieties of St. Augustinegrass including Floratam.

**What are the weeds in your lawn telling you? -** Woodsorrel also called Oxalis may be an indication that the lawn is being kept too dry; Florida pusley may mean you have a nematode problem; green kyllinga and dollarweed may mean the grass is being kept too wet; goosegrass may mean the soil is too compacted; red sorrel may mean the soil is on the acid side; and plantain may mean the soil is too alkaline.

Have a good gardening day,

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