

POLK COUNTY URBAN HORTICULTURER NEWSLETTER

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Dear Reader,

Thanks to those of you who have responded to my October purge notice and survey. We have received about 800 of the 2000 that I sent out, so there are still many of you who have not responded. If you want to continue to receive the Urban Horticulturer in 2006, please fill out the enclosed purge notice and survey (the survey is optional) and send it back to the Extension Office. If you can't remember whether or not you sent the first notice back to us, just go ahead and send the one enclosed this time - we will sort it out. Those not responding will be taken off the January 2006 mailing list. As I mentioned to you before, we are required by state law to purge the mailing list every 2 years.

By the way, we still have an adequate supply of Master Gardener Calendars for sale. I have enclosed an order sheet for your convenience. They make a great Christmas gift for a gardening friend or family member.

CHRISTMAS POINSETTIAS

With the Christmas season drawing near, it's time to think of decorations and gift giving. As the poinsettia is one of the most popular potted plants, you may want to purchase one as a gift. They now come in a wide variety of different

colors, sizes and shapes. The Monet Twilight has pink and red speckled bracts, while the Sonar White Glitter has a Jingle Bells look with red petals flecked with white specks. The cultivars plum Pudding and Cortez Burgandy have purple bracts.

The colorful part of the poinsettia is the modified leaves known as bracts. The actual flowers are yellow, found in tight clusters, and are relatively inconspicuous. There are single and double bracts in red, pink, white and variegated. When selecting your poinsettia, look for a compact plant with large colorful bracts and dark green leaves. The leaves should be present from the bracts to the base of the plant, nearly to the soil line. The bracts should extend over the lower foliage. Plants with true flowers that have fallen out should



be avoided as this is an indication of maturity. If the flowers are producing pollen, the bracts will be fading soon and the useful display life has passed.

If you receive a poinsettia as a gift, the following steps will be helpful in maintaining an attractive and healthy plant. If kept indoors, the plant should be placed in a sunny location protected from sudden temperature changes caused by heating vents or drafts. Poinsettias need day temperatures between 70 and 75 degrees F. and night temperatures of no less than 60 degrees F. Temperatures of 50 degrees F. and below may cause the leaves to wilt and the bracts to drop.

When the soil feels dry to the touch, the plant should be watered thoroughly. Watering correctly is very important as the plant will not tolerate over-watering, and under-watering causes wilting and leaf drop. If a decorative foil is wrapped around the pot, punch a hole in it to allow the water to drain away.

After four to six weeks, the poinsettia will become dormant and leaves will fall leaving only a stem. The watering should be reduced gradually at this time, but not so severely as to cause the stem to shrivel. Place the plant in a cool location allowing some light.

In south and central Florida, the plant can be used as a shrub in the landscape, after the danger of frost has past. Dig a hole one foot wider and six inches deeper than the root ball and back fill the hole with enough soil so that the plant will be sitting in the hole at the same height as it was in the container. Water thoroughly to remove air pockets. By placing mulch around the plant you will conserve moisture and help control weeds. The plant should be fertilized every four to six weeks.

To keep the plant bushy and compact with lots of flowers, pinch the tips of new shoots one-half inch when they reach four to five inches - each pinched shoot will produce two or more new shoots. Repeat this procedure until the middle of August. Pinching back the tips of shoots after the end of August will prevent or delay flowering at Christmas time.

Poinsettias will not bloom indoors if lights are used during the night when the flower buds are forming. The plants should receive only 8 hours of light, per day, from October 1st to November 15th. This can be accomplished by placing the plant in a dark room or covering it with a cardboard box. Discontinue treatment when

bracts begin to show color. By Thanksgiving the bracts should show color, and by Christmas they should be in full bloom.

COLD PROTECTION

I saw frost on a few roofs this morning in my neighborhood which tells me that colder weather is just around the corner. Now is the time to start thinking about protecting your cold sensitive plants. As I have mentioned before, many plants like orchids with exposed roots, weeping figs, desert rose, frangipani and episcia need to be protected at temperatures below 50 degrees F, while others are tolerant down into the 30's F.



Make sure you have an adequate supply of sheets, blankets, etc. to cover all of your sensitive plants. Many plants in pots can be kept outside until a freeze is forecast and then the night of the freeze be moved inside. So, make sure you pay attention to cold front weather forecasts. It is also good to remember that cold fronts moving into central Florida during the winter months are often accompanied by needed rainfall.

Some of the techniques for protecting plants from cold temperatures are as follows: 1) Cover flower beds with light blankets or sheets and then put a plastic cover on top of the sheet or blanket, 2) Wrap shrubs/small trees in blankets or burlap and make sure the material reaches the ground. To improve heat retention, the blanket or sheet can be covered with a layer of plastic, however, do not allow the plastic to come in contact with the plant tissue. The higher the wind speed, the less effective are plant wraps, 3) Totally cover the plant with plastic sheeting supported with PVC poles making a mini-greenhouse and place a large light bulb inside for heat (use low wattage outdoor approved lamps), 4) Put hay, pine needles or leaves over the entire plant, 5) Cover the

plants with flower pots, garbage cans, cardboard boxes, etc. and use newspaper inside for insulation and 6) Water plants the morning before a predicted freeze - wet soil will hold more heat than dry soil.

I don't recommend the use of water for cold protection. Most home water systems will not supply enough, evenly placed water to adequately protect plants. Trying to use this technique, as a homeowner, would waste a lot of water and it even might make the plant damage worse. The principal of using water to protect plants is not that the ice blanket insulates the plant, but that as the water freezes it give off heat which keeps the plant just above 32 degrees F. And, as you probably have seen in strawberry fields, the water must be kept on until the dew point is above 32 degrees F.

Also, washing ice or frost from a sensitive plant will not protect it from freeze or frost damage. Once the dew freezes on the leaf surface of a sensitive plant, the leaf cells will be destroyed by ice formation inside the cells of the leaf and the leaf will die.

RYEGRASS

In north Florida, annual, intermediate and improved (perennial) ryegrass, is used to over-seed warm season turfgrasses such as St. Augustine, Bahiagrass, centipedegrass and Bermudagrass, because they often turn brown during the winter months due to cold weather. Ryegrass is a good choice because of its rapid seed germination, fast growth, adaptability and relatively low cost.

In central Florida, the warm season turfgrasses often remain fairly green during the winter months, so over-seeding with ryegrass may not be necessary to improve color. However, if you

have an area under a tree, between houses, etc. which turns brown during the winter months, you may want to consider sowing ryegrass seed. Ryegrass seems to compete very well with oak trees for light, nutrients and water, is very cold tolerant, and does well in the shady areas. Keep in mind that ryegrasses will need to be mowed on a regular basis until they die-out in late spring.

In central Florida, recommended sowing dates range from mid-November to early December. It is best to wait until daytime temperatures are in the mid to low 70's F. Seed germination will be improved if you rake out debris and mow closely before sowing the seed. It also helps if you rake over the seeded area to make sure all of the seed have reached soil surface and are not hung up on vegetation. The seed will need irrigation or rainfall once or twice a day until they have germinated. I like to sow ryegrass seed just before a winter cold front.

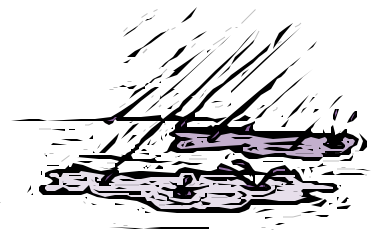
Protect YOUR Watershed

by Anne Yasalonis

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What IS a watershed and why should you protect it?

Watersheds are important to everyone because everyone lives in a watershed! A watershed is an area of land that water flows across as it moves toward a common body of water, such as a stream, river, lake or coast. As rain water moves in a watershed, it picks up harmful contaminants from our



yards, driveways and streets. This mix of harmful stormwater runoff is called non-point source pollution because it comes from many random sources. Because everyone lives in a watershed, it is important that everyone work to protect it. There are many simple things you can do to positively impact your

watershed.

Help protect your watershed in the following ways. Dispose of motor oil and chemicals properly. NEVER dump them or anything down a stormdrain. These pollutants can get into our water system. Practice Florida-friendly landscaping by limiting the amount of fertilizers and pesticides you use in your yard. Inspect and maintain your septic system. Harmful contaminants can leak from a improperly maintained system and harm the water supply. Pick up after your pets. The bacteria from pet waste can be carried by rainwater and harms fish and other creatures. Choose a lawn care service that uses environmentally friendly products and practices. And, conserve water.

MISC. DECEMBER GARDENING

Flowers To Plant - Alyssum, baby's breath, begonia, bush daisy, calendula, candytuft, carnation, chrysanthemum, delphinium, dianthus, dusty miller, foxglove, geranium, goddetia, hollyhock, Iceland poppy, lobelia, ornamental cabbage and kale, petunia, salvia, shasta daisy, snapdragon, statice, stock, sweet pea, verbena and viola.

Vegetables To Plant - Beets, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, collards, horseradish, lettuce, mustard, onions, peas, radicchio, radishes, spinach, Swiss chard and turnips.

Herbs To Plant - Anise, arugula, basil, bay, chives, cilantro, coriander, dill, fennel, garlic, lavender, mint, oregano, parsley, rosemary, sage, sweet marjoram, thyme and water cress.

Snapdragons - Now is a good time to plant snapdragons in central Florida. They come in

many colors including white, yellow, orange, red, purple and almost black. True blue is the only color not available. They are quite cold tolerant and withstand frost and light freezes for a short duration of time. They are often planted along with petunias and pansies. Space the plants 10-14 inches apart and be careful not to plant too deeply which could lead to stem rot.



They are available in various sizes falling into one of five groups - Tall (2-3 feet), Intermediate (1-2 feet), Short (9-12 inches), Dwarf (4-9 inches) and Trailing. The Tall cultivars include the mixed color collections: 'Rocket', 'Bright Butterflies', 'Supreme Double' with fine ruffled flowers, and the open faced 'Madame Butterfly'. 'Monarch', 'Pixie', and 'Vanity Fair' are Intermediate mixtures. Short cultivars include the mixtures 'Tom Thumb' and 'Floral Carpet' and the bicolored 'Peaches and Cream'. 'Magic Carpet' and Little Gem are popular Dwarf Cultivars.

Have a good gardening day,

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For Polk County Gardening Information and Horticultural Links:
<http://polkhort.ifas.ufl.edu>

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

