

## **POLK COUNTY URBAN HORTICULTURER NEWSLETTER**

**June 2006**

**Vol. 6 No. 2**

**Dear Reader,**

**Sorry for the long delay between newsletters. I have had a very busy spring. We started off in March with Youth Fair, then Agrifest for two weeks in April, followed by Earth Day at Historic Bok Sanctuary and May has been filled with Meetings and Symposiums.**

**Agrifest program** -In case you are interested, Agrifest is a program for school children sponsored by Farm Bureau and supported by the Polk County Extension Service. Each year 5500 4<sup>th</sup> graders from Polk County are bussed to the Extension Office, over a ten day period, and given 20 minute programs on the value of agriculture to Polk County. The agricultural disciplines covered include livestock, bee keeping, phosphate, forestry, aquaculture, citrus, water conservation and of course horticulture.

As part of the horticulture program this year, we wanted to give each student a plant to take home. In past years, we taught the children how to start a cutting

in water and soil, but we couldn't allow them to take the cutting home so they were always disappointed. This year the Master Gardeners and I decided that part of each 20 minute session would be devoted to giving each student an annual plant plug to plant in a cup and take home – 5500 plants! Thanks to the Master Gardeners, 10 volunteers each day, the program went just fine.

Overall, about 15,000 school children attending the Agrifest and Historic Bok Sanctuary Earth Day programs were taught Florida Yards and Neighborhoods principles including information on water wise plants, creating new plants, protecting good bugs (lady bugs) and water conservation. Hopefully, I will now have more time to work on newsletters.

**For sale items** - A new book is available called “Your Florida Guide to Perennials” Selection, Establishment, and Maintenance by Sydney Park-Brown and Rick Schoellhorn. It is similar to the Florida Guide to Shrubs and the Florida Guide to Bedding Plants. The Master Gardeners will have this book for sale

here at the Extension Office for \$20.00. The Master Gardeners also have Melaleuca mulch for sale for \$2.50 per bag.

### **SUMMER PROGRAMS**

Carrie Winter, the Urban Forester for Polk County, Joe Wolf, a Master Gardener, and I will be offering a homeowner tree care program on June 24<sup>th</sup> at the Extension Office from 9:00 a.m. to 11 a.m. All attendees will receive a free cypress tree. In addition, I plan to offer a program in August on homeowner care of palms. The Master Gardener Training Program for 2006 will start on Tuesday September 19<sup>th</sup> and meet every Tuesday until December 12<sup>th</sup>. I hope to see you at one or all of the programs.

Anne Yasalonis, the Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program Coordinator, will offer programs on Creating a Rain Barrel on July 22 at the Kelly Recreation Center from 9:00 a.m. to 10:30 a.m., Landscaping With Native Plants on Monday June 12<sup>th</sup> at the Magnolia Building in Lakeland from 6:30 to 8:00 p.m., Landscape Design 101 on Saturday June 24<sup>th</sup> from 10:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at the Kelly Recreation Complex in Lakeland and Waterwise Landscaping on Monday July 10<sup>th</sup> from 6:30 to 7:30 p.m. at the Extension Service in Bartow.

### **ORAL RABIES VACCINE FOR RACOONS**

A few weeks ago a lady from Lakeland telephoned me and reported that while walking her dog, the dog had found a small, smelly cube along a fence line. The dog had chewed the cube open to expose a small clear plastic bag filled

with a pink liquid which was sealed with wax. She had checked with her local vet, animal control and the police department and no one could identify it. She was concerned about it, so she brought it to the Extension Office so I could examine it.

The first thing that came to my mind was the oral rabies vaccine for wild raccoons. After a few telephone calls to local agencies I found that this cube was indeed a cube of oral rabies vaccine, but I was not aware that it was being distributed in Lakeland.

The bait cubes are 1.25 x 1.25 x 1.25 inches in size the outside of which is made from a fishmeal polymer bait. The vaccine packet, which contains 2 ml. (1/2 teaspoon) of pink colored oral rabies vaccine, is waxed into the center of the bait cube. A raccoon is vaccinated by eating the bait containing the vaccine and will be protected from rabies infection from another raccoon for about six months.

It is not possible for people, pets or livestock to get rabies from the vaccine because it contains only a single gene of the rabies virus, not the entire virus. However, it is recommended that the bait cubes be handled with gloves because people with eczema or immunosuppressed conditions may be prone to a local infection from the vaccinia virus if it should get into an open wound or sore. Pregnant women or youth under the age of 18 should not handle the bait. If the bait or the liquid vaccine is touched, thoroughly wash exposed skin with soap and water.

If you find one of these baits near your home, leave it alone if it is intact and in

an area where pet or child contact is not likely. However, if the bait is out in the open or where contact by pets or children is possible, put on gloves and toss it into deeper cover. If the bait is open or damaged, protect your hands with gloves; place it in a plastic bag and dispose of it in the normal trash. For further information call the rabies vaccine information line at (866) 487-3297.

Remember, it is never safe to handle or feed raccoons. Raccoons are wild animals and can severely bite a person. Feeding them increases the chances that they can transmit disease to people or pets. People bitten by raccoons must be administered anti-rabies treatment if the raccoon is not available for testing.

I have at times seen children handling baby raccoons. Keep in mind that rabies can be passed to the offspring from an infected mother. So, baby raccoons can be infected with rabies without ever coming into contact with another infected animal.

### **NEW VERSUS OLD TURF CULTIVARS**

**Drought damage** – After several months of dry weather, St. Augustine lawns are becoming stressed, particularly in areas which can only be watered once per week. St. Augustinegrass should grow adequately with two irrigations per week of approximately ½ to ¾ inch of water. I don't believe irrigating once per week, with no rainfall, will be enough to sustain a St. Augustine lawn.

The reason that St. Augustinegrass is so sensitive to drought is that it has above

ground stems called stolons compared to Bahiagrass, Bermudagrass, Zoysiagrass and Centipedegrass which have below ground stems called rhizomes. When the above ground stems (stolons) in St. Augustinegrass dry out, the grass dies in that spot and has to be replaced with sod or plugs. However, grasses with underground stems (rhizomes) turn brown above ground, but below ground rhizomes survive extended periods of drought and re-grow with rainfall or irrigation.

**New St. Augustinegrass cultivars** - There are a few new cultivars of St. Augustinegrass – **Classic, Amerishade, Delta Shade** and **Sapphire**. A few of them appear to have improvements over the older cultivars such as Floratam, Bitter Blue, Palmetto, Delmar and Seville, but no improvement in drought tolerance has been demonstrated at this point.

**Amerishade** is the slowest growing of the new St. Augustine cultivars needing mowing only once every 2-3 weeks during the summer months. It is also the most shade tolerant of the St. Augustine cultivars. Unfortunately, it is very susceptible to turfgrass diseases particularly brown patch and at this time is not being recommended by UF.

**New Zoysiagrass cultivars** - **Empire Zoysiagrass**, which is a new cultivar of Zoysiagrass, is currently being used in the landscape in Florida with some success. It is low growing and dense and holds its green color well, however this cultivar of zoysiagrass is not shade tolerant and rather than being susceptible to chinch bugs it's susceptible to hunting billbugs – a type of white grub. It is also susceptible to a few diseases.

**Empire zoysiagrass** is somewhat more drought tolerant than St. Augustine because of its rhizomes (underground stems), but most likely will require just as much maintenance as St. Augustinegrass to keep its green appearance. On the bright side, it may turn brown with once per week watering under drought conditions, but it should grow back from its underground rhizomes with renewed rainfall or irrigation similar to Bahiagrass. St. Augustinegrass under similar drought conditions probably would die and need re-sodding or sprigging. In any case, Empire Zoysia's improved drought tolerance may make it an acceptable replacement for St. Augustinegrass in areas that receive adequate sunlight (at least 6-7 hours of sunlight per day)

A new UF Zoysiagrass cultivar has recently been released called **UltimateFlora**. This was developed at the University of Florida and is being marketed by Environmental Turf Inc. It has shade tolerance similar to the dwarf St. Augustinegrass cultivars. It has finer leaf blades than Empire, but can still be mowed with a rotary mower – reel is preferred. When using a rotary mower, the recommendation is to mow at the highest recommended height. It probably will be a 1-2 years before this is available to the general public.

The University of Florida is currently evaluating 300 different cultivars of Zoysiagrass as well as many other turf cultivars at the new Turf and Ornamental Research Center in Citra south of Gainesville.

**New cultivars of Bermudagrass** – A new cultivar of Bermudagrass is called

**Celebration**. It has good wear tolerance, good quality and color ratings. Shade tolerance research is ongoing. It may be another possible replacement for St. Augustinegrass, but like Empire Zoysiagrass it has a moderately high level of maintenance. On the down side, it browns after several winter frosts.

**New cultivars of Centipedegrass** – Centipedegrass has not been commonly grown in central Florida due to its susceptibility to nematodes and its intolerance to hot weather. A new cultivar has been developed by the University of Florida called **Hammock**. This cultivar was particularly selected for south Florida as it has high tolerance to heat. However, it has low tolerance to cold weather. This cultivar will probably turn brown in central Florida during the winter months following frosts and/or freezes, so it may not be an acceptable replacement for St. Augustinegrass.

**Summary of new residential turfgrasses** –

1. Bahiagrass still requires less maintenance and is more drought tolerant than any other warm season turfgrass commercially available in central Florida. There is ongoing research at Citra on crosses of Bahiagrass (Paspalum notatum) and Seashore Paspalum (Paspalum virgatum) hoping to combine the positive characteristics of each species – drought tolerance and good appearance.

2. There isn't any University data to indicate that the new cultivars of St. Augustine are any more drought tolerant or require less management than the old cultivars. It seems that once per week watering of any St. Augustinegrass cultivar will not be enough during

periods of drought to sustain the lawn, therefore sections may die and need replacement.

3. Either Empire Zoysiagrass or the new cultivar UltimateFlora may be a better choice than St. Augustinegrass. Both cultivars have human appear as toe ticklers. UltimateFlora has shade tolerance similar to the dwarf St. Augustine cultivars while Empire Zoysia requires full sun. Management practices for Zoysiagrass, such as mowing height, fertilization and insect pest control, differ from St. Augustinegrass, therefore the success of the lawn will depend on homeowners and landscape management companies making necessary adjustments.

4. Celebration Bermudagrass may also be a replacement choice for St. Augustinegrass, but frosts and freezes cause temporary die-back during winter months.

5. Hammock Centipedegrass will probably work well in south Florida, but due to its susceptibility to cold weather may not be a good choice for central Florida.

6. The University of Florida continues to search for a good looking drought tolerant turfgrass which requires low maintenance. At this time a silver bullet is not available.

## **GRASSHOPPERS**

I have had numerous calls from homeowners wanting to know how to control large black and yellow grasshoppers which were eating their landscape plants. This grasshopper is probably the southern lubber

grasshopper which may reach a length of over three inches. They tend to concentrate on a few favorite plants such as amaryllis, but if necessary will eat almost anything.

They mature to adults and mate during the summer months starting in June. The adult females lay their eggs in the ground about two inches deep. The eggs start hatching in March of the next year in central Florida and migrate up onto plants in clusters of 20-30 small black nymphs. You need to watch for these small black grasshoppers in March and implement control measures while they are small. When I see a clump of these grasshopper nymphs, I strip them off the leaf with my hand, making sure that none escape, and dispose of them.

June is a bad time to try to control these grasshoppers, because they are now becoming large adults with a big appetite. They may have matured in your landscape or have migrated to your landscape from adjacent fields – usually wet, weedy areas. At this stage, hand picking and killing the adults is the best procedure. Insecticides with the ingredient bifenthrin or cyfluthrin may offer some relief.

## **DEALING WITH DROUGHT**

By Anne Yasalonis  
FYN Program Coordinator

The weather continues to warm up and yet there is no sign of rain in sight! This can cause a great deal of stress in our landscapes. But what can you do? Follow these tips to maintain your landscape:

- ✓ Select drought tolerant plants and/or native Florida plants. Native plants are very well

adapted to the extreme conditions in Florida and are more likely to cope with (and recover from) drought.

- ✓ Irrigate your most sensitive plants first. If you have highly visible areas or areas of concern concentrate on irrigating those areas.
- ✓ Make sure your irrigation system is properly maintained. Check your system to make sure all areas are being covered and the sprinklers aren't watering the street or driveway.
- ✓ Measure your irrigation water. Make sure you are applying ½ to ¾ inch of water each time you irrigate. This ensures that you are wetting the entire root zone. This helps plants become more drought-tolerant.
- ✓ Irrigate using micro-irrigation. Micro-irrigation is the most efficient way to irrigate by reducing the amount of water that is lost to evaporation.
- ✓ Mow less frequently to reduce stress on the turf. Also make sure you mow at a high setting. Maintaining grass at a taller height will help increase the drought tolerance of the grass.
- ✓ Make sure you have 2-3 inches of mulch in all of your mulched beds. The mulch will help the soil hold water and moderate the soil temperature.
- ✓ Irrigate in the early morning. Watering when the air is cooler and there is less wind will help to reduce the amount of water lost to evaporation.
- ✓ Irrigate using water from a rain barrel or cistern. If you were lucky enough to have harvested

rainwater prior to the drought, use this water for your irrigation needs.

Following these tips will help reduce the amount of damage from drought in your landscape. You can also access more tips and information at the Florida Yards and Neighborhoods website at <http://polkfyn.ifas.ufl.edu>.

## MISC. JUNE GARDENING

**Vegetables to plant** – Boniato, calabaza, chayote, cherry tomato, dasheen, malanga, okra, roselle, southern peas, Seminole pumpkin, sweet cassava, sweet potatoes and yard long beans.

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

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

**Azaleas** – This is about last time of the year to prune azaleas. It is also a good time to start new plants from cuttings while pruning your azaleas. Make the cutting about 4-6 inches long and stick in pots of media to root. The cut end should be dipped in rooting hormone which can be purchased at most retail garden centers.

Put the pots in a shady area and mist several times per day. It may help to surround the pots of cuttings to keep them moist. You should have rooted cuttings in 8-10 weeks or sooner.

**Leaf rolling weevil** – A client recently brought to my office an oak leaf tightly rolled into a ball about 1/4 inch in diameter. He had found these little leaf rolls all over the ground under the tree. I believe a little snout beetle, Homoeolabus analis, is responsible for this rolled up leaf. It lays an egg on a leaf, then rolls the leaf into a tight ball. The hatching weevil grub feeds on the inner leaf tissue. This is just another of the many interesting insects that live on trees without any known biological or economic impact on the tree. By the way the rolled up leaf is called a “nidus” and it is rolled up with great precision.

**Citrus** – If you didn’t fertilize your mature citrus tree(s) last month then do so now with a citrus fertilizer. Do not use fertilizer spikes. Also watch out for scales, aphids, mealy bugs and white flies and apply pesticidal oil if necessary. It is usually a good idea to apply copper at the end of June to protect citrus trees from the greasy spot fungus.

**Soil solarization** – June is a good month to rototill, level and cover garden areas with two layers of clear plastic separated with PVC pipe or some other spacer. Wet the soil before covering the area with plastic. Leave the plastic on the soil until the end of summer. The heat from the sun should do a good job of killing weed seed, nematodes, fungus and insects. Do not re-work the soil before planting. Just plant into the soil as you prepared it in June. Disturbing the soil

after solarization could bring weeds, diseases and nematodes back to the surface.

**Bulbs** – You will find a large selection of tropical bulbs and bulb-like plants for the warmer weather in Florida which will product great summer color. Consider caladiums, butterfly ginger, canna, shell ginger, crinums, spider lilies, African lily and walking iris.

Have a great gardening day and summer,

David Shibles  
Residential Horticulturist  
Polk County Extension Service  
P.O. Box 9005 Drawer HS03  
Bartow, FL 33831

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

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