

POLK COUNTY URBAN HORTICULTURER NEWSLETTER

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HAPPY EASTER

This year, as always, Easter lilies will be at the top of the list for Easter gift flowers. When the flowers fade, the plant may be set outside, watered, fertilized and allowed to grow and develop a new bulb. After the top dies down in late July, the bulb can be stored in a plastic bag, until October or November. It then can be planted and grown again for next Easter.

Easter lilies do well when planted in the ground. So, if you prefer, when the blooms are gone, you may set the plants in the ground immediately or wait until the stem and leaves have died back in the summer. Take care of the plant as you would any of your ornamentals when it comes to watering and fertilizing. Be sure to plant it in a well drained location. Bulbs in locations that are continually wet will rot.

CONSERVING WATER

We should all be giving serious thought about reducing water use particularly since we have been in a drought for several years. Florida's fresh water supply is limited, and our exploding population is putting ever increasing pressure on this finite supply. It's up to all of us to practice water conservation. As home gardeners, we should

make it a point to use only as much water in the landscape as we absolutely need. If we waste water now, we may have to face serious restrictions in the future. Here are a few facts to ponder:

- The experts estimate that 40-60 percent of local water use goes into the landscape.
- Irrigating ½ acre of landscape 4 times per month requires 40,730 gallons and 488,760 per year.
- One human requires 16,000 gallons per life time.

Water restrictions - At the current time, residents of Polk County can water turf only one day per week before 8:00 a.m. and after 6:00 p.m. Addresses ending in 0 or 1 irrigate on Mondays, those ending in 2 or 3 irrigate on Tuesday, those ending in 4 or 5 irrigate on Wednesday, those ending on 6 or 7 irrigate on Thursday and those ending in 8 or 9 or those without a discernable address on Friday. Hot spots in turf can be hand watered any day of the week at the above times. Low volume irrigation may be used on non-lawn areas any day of the week, but must adhere to the before 8:00 a.m. or after 6:00 p.m. times. New plant material including turf may be watered on any day for up to 60 days after installation.

Please adhere to water restriction policies. As you may have read, the water restrictions

in several other counties including Hillsborough, Pasco, Pinellas, Manatee, Sarasota, Charlotte and DeSoto are more strict than in Polk. If the drought in central Florida becomes more severe we may see an increase in our water restrictions. Water restrictions for our district, including municipalities, can be viewed at the Southwest Florida Water Management District Web Site <http://watermatters.org>.

Organic matter - Improving the water holding capacity of the soil is one important way to conserve water. Most Florida soils are sandy, and don't hold water very well. Applying generous amounts of organic materials, such as compost and manures, at planting will increase the water holding capacity of the soil. I don't know of any product which can be added to established turf which will increase its drought tolerance. There are several products on the market which claim to increase the drought tolerance of established turf, but I don't believe the claims can be backed up by university research.

Irrigation on lawns - Irrigation systems are easily damaged during lawn maintenance activities and the damages often go unnoticed. The irrigation system then runs early in the morning on irrigation days and no one notices that it is malfunctioning. So, the homeowner needs to check his system occasionally to make sure it is working properly. Check the output with coffee cans or some similar container not with the naked eye.

Water restrictions in most areas of Polk County allow lawn watering one day per week. Your sprinkler system should apply ½ to ¾ inches per application event. Generally ½ inch of water will wet the turfgrass root zone to a depth of 8-10 inches deep. Any less than ½ inch will encourage

the roots to grow close to the surface and make the turf more susceptible to drought damage. Any more than about ¾ of an inch will wet beyond the root zone and carry nutrients out of reach of the roots and into the aquifer.

There is considerable debate about whether St. Augustinegrass will be sustained with ½ to ¾ inch of irrigation on one day per watering during times of drought particularly in the deep sandy soils of the central ridge (north of I-4 along SR 27). The University of Florida's current position is that St. Augustinegrass can be sustained under the above conditions if the turf is managed properly.

Turf management, particularly St. Augustinegrass, is crucial to its survival during times of drought stress - no question. Besides irrigation, attention needs to be paid to mowing interval and height, fertilization and pest control. All of these factors affect the turfs capacity to survive under periods of limited rainfall and irrigation.

More drought tolerance research, such as the SAWS test in Texas, is needed in central Florida on the various warm season turfgrasses including St. Augustinegrass, Bahiagrass, Zoysiagrass, Centipedegrass and Bermudagrass. The plots in the Texas SAWS test had automatic closing devices which closed during rain events and allowed the investigator to determine which cultivar had the best survivability under drought conditions - the results were not confounded with unexpected rain events.. The Texas tests gave St. Augustinegrass a relatively high drought tolerance score, but the tests were conducted in sandy clay loam soil not 98 percent sand as we have in many Florida landscapes. This type of test should give us exact data on the relative survivability of the various warm season turfgrasses grown in

Florida. Unfortunately, the closing systems for these test plots are very expensive.

Irrigation on shrubs - Most shrubs can be established if they are watered 2-3 times per week for the first several months. After establishment some shrubs demonstrate their need for water by wilting. If they continue to wilt during the evening, and it doesn't rain, they should be watered the following morning. Azaleas are typical of a plant that wilts very quickly during hot dry periods. Carefully inspect azaleas in your landscape for wilting, because azaleas will not take severe wilting for more than a few days before serious injury starts to occur.

Many shrubs show no early symptoms of drought stress. If drought conditions continue, however, they may exhibit injury symptoms such as leaf drop and/or browning of leaf margins, so the damage is already beginning to occur. I don't have a specific formula that I can give you as to when to water these plants. The University of Florida is currently attempting to secure a million dollar grant to help answer this question. It is uncertain if this question can be categorically answered.

The best advice we can offer is to gain experience with these plants and develop a feeling for what happens when you don't water for a certain number of days, taking into consideration weather and soil type. It's tricky because the viburnums on the north side of your house may have different water requirements than the ones on the south side. As a rule of thumb, I would say that you rarely need to water established shrubs in the winter time, water in the spring when you don't have rain from a few days to a week, water rarely in the summer, and water in the fall as you do in the spring. Sadly, a lot of water is probably wasted on shrubs, because the homeowner is unsure if

the plant needs water.

MULCH

Mulches enhance root growth, reduce soil temperature fluctuations, prevent packing and crusting of the soil, minimize runoff and soil erosion, conserve moisture, help control weeds, and add to the beauty of the landscape by providing a cover of uniform color and an interesting texture to the surface. Keep the mulch 2-3 inches away from the stems of the plants and 2-3 inches deep. When placed against the stem, the high-moisture environment of the mulch increases the chances of stem rot, which can result in plant death.

When mulching an individual shrub planted in the lawn, cover an area at least two times wider than the planting hole. This will help the plant to establish more quickly by reducing competition from turfgrass. When mulching a shrub bed, cover the entire area of the bed.

There are a number of mulches available to the homeowner including pine bark chips, eucalyptus, cypress mulch, hardwood chips, pine needles, oak leaves, yard debris and several others. The University of Florida does not recommend using cypress mulch because much of this product comes from the straight cutting and chipping of cypress trees.

Unfortunately, melaleuca mulch (also called Florimulch) is still not being carried by any garden centers in Polk County and I don't know the reason. University of Florida research indicate that chipped and composted melaleuca wood makes an excellent mulch and is the least attractive of all wood mulches to termites. The melaleuca tree is a invasive weed tree in

central and south Florida that needs to be removed from our environment. Melaleuca mulch, also called Floramulch, is available here at the Extension office. The Master Gardeners sell this mulch to the general public for \$3.00 per two cubic foot bag.

RIGHT PLANT, RIGHT PLACE
Matching a Plant to Site Conditions
by Anne Yasalonis
Polk County FYN Coordinator

Right plant, right place is one of the most important principles of Florida-friendly landscaping. If you take the time to research and choose the appropriate plants for your site conditions, you can avoid potential maintenance problems. Prior to choosing plant material you should know your soil pH, the sunny and shady locations, drainage, temperature and structural limitations (such as septic system, power lines). Follow these five tips when choosing the right plant for the right place.

1. Wet versus Dry

Choosing drought-tolerant plants is a great idea, but not if you have low-lying areas that tend to stay wet. Many drought tolerant plants will succumb to disease and pests if they are planted in wet areas. Drought-tolerant plants do best in exposed areas, hot, sunny, areas and southern or western exposures. It is important to install plants in the landscape that will not waste time, energy and money maintaining.

2. Wind-Wise Plants

Plant for winds during summer and winter months. In the winter, winds prevail from the north/northwest. A screen or hedge of hardy evergreens on the north side of the house will create a barrier against wind and reduce evaporation losses. In the summer, winds prevail from the south. This air

circulation can help cool the landscape and reduce moisture on plant foliage.

3. Shade Loving Plants

Trees and shrubs placed properly around the home can improve heating and cooling capacity. Tree shade can reduce air conditioning costs by up to 50%. Plant deciduous shade trees on the south, east and west sides to shade the house in the summer and let warm light into the windows in the winter. Your air conditioner can also benefit from shade. An air conditioning unit uses less energy when it is shaded from direct sun, just make sure that the airflow is not blocked.

4. Matchmaking

Group plants according to their maintenance needs. Turf areas should be separate from trees and shrubs. Turf and ornamentals have different water, fertilizer and maintenance needs so you can reduce maintenance and conserve water by grouping plants in mulched beds. Turf and landscape beds should never be irrigated in the same zone because of their differing needs.

5. Turf

Turf has its place in the landscape-sunny recreational areas. Most turf does not do well in the shade. If you need an evergreen carpet in a shady area, a groundcover is a better choice.

MISC. APRIL GARDENING

Pruning Pygmy Date Palms - Many pygmy date palms were severely damaged by the January/February freezes. I have had numerous requests for pruning information. The best policy is leave all fronds on the trunk if they are showing some green. The reason for this is that palms have the capacity to move nutrients from the lower fronds up into the crown where all the new

growth occurs. Removing these partially dead fronds removes nutrients which the plant can use in the future. The totally dead fronds can be cut off at the trunk being careful not to injure the trunk in the process.

Flowers to plant - African daisy, ageratum, aster, balsam, begonia, black-eyed Susan, blue daze, browallia, bush daisy, cat's whiskers, celosia, cleome, coleus, coreopsis, cosmos, crossandra, dahlberg daisy, gazania, gaillardia, gerbera, goldenrod, impatiens, Joseph's coat, lantana, lisianthus, marigold, melampodium, Mexican sunflower, moon flower, nicotiana, nierembergia, pentas, periwinkle, porterweed, portulaca, purslane, salvia, sunflower, torenia and zinnia.

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

Vegetables to plant - Calabaza, cantaloupe, cassava, chayote, cherry tomato, cucumber, dasheen, eggplant, Jerusalem artichoke, jicama, lima bean, malabar spinach, malanga, New Zealand spinach, okra, pepper, roselle, Seminole pumpkin, snap beans, squash, Southern pea, sweet potato, tamarillo, yam and yard long bean.

Florida bulbs - Don't forget bulbs for your Florida garden. There are a number of bulbs which do well in central Florida including the African lily, amaryllis, Eucharist lily, blood lily, caladium, canna, crinum, rain lily and spider lily. Most do well in full sun to partial shade, but check the label to be sure.

When planting add plenty of organic matter like composted manure. Water when the soil below the surface becomes dry. Use a 2-3 inch layer of mulch and fertilize over the

mulch three times per year - March, May and August with a good slow release fertilizer. Remove declining leaves as needed and divide every 3-4 years.

Soil testing - Do not add lime or dolomite to your lawn or garden until you have a pH test conducted, even if it is under an oak and you think the soil must be very acid from the oak leaves. Adding lime or dolomite to an already high pH may make matters worse. The Polk County Master Gardeners conduct soil pH tests every Thursday from 9:00 to 12:00 noon for a \$3.00 fee.

We also can send you a soil testing kit which will enable you to take your own soil sample and send it directly to the UF Soil Testing Laboratory. You can have pH run for a \$3.00 fee and/or a test for nutrients including potassium, calcium, magnesium and phosphorous for a \$4.00 fee. If phosphorous is adequate or high, use low phosphorous fertilizers - like 15-0-15.

Citrus - Watch your trees for signs of aphids, mealybugs, whiteflies and scales. These insects suck the plant juices and deposit a sticky excreta on the leaves below. A non-pathogenic fungus called sooty mold grows on this deposit. Sooty mold is not a citrus pathogen, however it makes a black coating on leaves, stems and even fruit. This mold makes the tree look ugly and can be so severe that the leaves are unable to photosynthesize.

How do you determine the presence of these sucking insects on a citrus tree? Aphids are often present on the undersides of new leaves, and cause the leaves to curl.

Scales are seen as little raised areas on leaves, stems and fruit. The immature scale does not move once it has started to feed on the host. The adult insect and eggs are

protected by a shield created by the adult which make them difficult to control. This time of year the eggs hatch and exposed crawlers move out from under the shield to find a new feeding site and are vulnerable to sprays.

Mealybug adults and nymphs, which are mobile, make large masses of cotton-like material in which they live and embed eggs. They can be found on leaves, stems and fruit.

Whiteflies are tiny moth like insects that fly up in clouds when disturbed and feed on leaves stems and fruit. The larvae also live on stems, leaves and fruit and like scales do not move from the original feeding site. Whitefly larvae do not have a protective shield like scales.

Control these sucking insects with horticultural oil and/or insecticidal soap. It may take 2-3 weekly applications to bring these pests under control. The soap and oil will also loosen the sooty mold so that irrigation and rainfall will wash it off the leaves. Keep in mind that these pests are often controlled by beneficial insects. Have a good gardening day,

David Shibles, Urban Horticulturist
Polk County Cooperative Extension Service
P.O. Box 9005, Drawer HS03
Bartow, Florida 33831-9005
(863) 519-8677 Ext. 109

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