

Polk County Urban Horticulturer Newsletter

February 2009

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Dear Reader,

We have just received a new shipment of melaleuca mulch in two cubic foot bags. The Master Gardeners are selling this mulch again this year for \$3.00 per bag. The best time to come for pick-up is between 8:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m.

We also have many Master Gardener Calendars left for 2009. The Master Gardeners are selling these for the discounted price of \$4.00.

FREEZES AND CITRUS TREES

During the end of January and the first of February we have experienced some of the coldest weather in recent years. I have received numerous calls from homeowners with questions about care of their citrus trees before and after a freeze. I will address some of the common questions even though most of the damage has already occurred.



What citrus trees (not including fruit) are the most sensitive to cold? Limes and

lemons are the most cold sensitive citrus followed by grapefruit, sweet oranges/tangelos and tangerines. You can expect considerable defoliation of lemons and limes after several hours of freezing temperatures. My lime tree which sits 8 feet from my grapefruit tree was 85% defoliated - there was only slight defoliation on the grapefruit tree.

The degree of damage depends on the health and acclimation of the tree at the time of exposure. Poorly maintained trees may be more susceptible to cold damage than well maintained trees.

What citrus fruit are most sensitive to cold? This depends on the size of the fruit. In other words, grapefruit being a larger fruit, is generally the most tolerant to cold damage, followed by sweet oranges/tangelos, tangerines and lemons and limes.

Should I pick my fruit before a freeze? I think the best approach is to wait and see if the fruit is damaged from the freeze. If the fruit has been frozen, then it can be picked and squeezed for juice. There should not be much loss of juice if the frozen fruit is picked and squeezed within a few days. If the fruit has not been frozen, then it can remain on the tree and be picked as needed.

What happens to the fruit after it is frozen? Freeze damage starts at the stem end of the fruit and works its way down to the flower end. When the vesicles in the fruit freeze, they burst and will eventually dry out so there will be little to no juice in the frozen areas. You can section the fruit in small slices from the top end down and probably determine where the freeze damage stops, if the fruit has not been totally frozen.

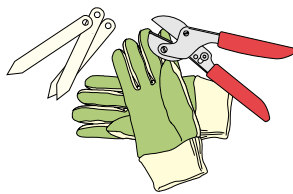
How do I know if the fruit should be picked and squeezed after a severe freeze? After the frozen fruit thaws, it will have a spongy feel. If the fruit is hard and firm, then it probably can be left on the tree.

How do I know if the fruit is good to eat after a freeze? Generally, if the fruit is firm and smells good, then it can be eaten.

Is there some way to protect trees from freezes? Small trees can be covered with sheets, blankets, etc. to reduce the amount of heat loss during a freeze. Large trees are cold hardy to most minimum temperatures experienced in Florida. Historically, severe freeze damage to mature citrus trees occurs infrequently in Florida.

PRUNING AFTER A FREEZE

You can prune freeze damaged plants early so that they look reasonably acceptable, but you must remember that any new growth will be very susceptible to freeze damage and must be adequately protected during following freezes. In other words, don't forget to cover the plants and make sure to have enough covering material



if an unexpected freeze occurs. The reduction in plant size from early pruning will increase the effectiveness of the freeze cloths, because heat loss will be less from a smaller covered plant, because its closer to the ground.

University of Florida Horticulturists recommend delaying pruning until the danger of a bad freeze has passed which is about the end of February or the first of March.

There are a number of research based reasons supporting this recommendation: 1) if you prune real early, this may encourage new growth which will be cold sensitive (even if the plant does not have new growth low temperatures can damage the cambium), 2) research has shown that leaving the old tissue on the plant will help protect the plant 1-2 degrees lower than a pruned plant, and 3) by waiting to prune you will know the extent of the damage and will not cut off good tissue. In any case, it may be simpler for most people to go through their entire yard the first of March and do all the pruning at one time.

I have seen a lot of freeze damage to pygmy date palms (*Phoenix roebelenii*) in Polk County and have received many calls. Contrary to other date palms, the pygmy date palm is quite cold sensitive. If your's is damaged, check to see if there is green growth down in the crown. If so, the palm will probably survive. I would not prune off any damaged fronds until the danger of frost and freezes has passed. Be sure to carefully protect the crown with sheets or blankets if we should have another freeze.

For the future, you may want to consider ways in which you can avoid cold damage problems. One consideration is to plant cold hardy plants. The University of Florida, IFAS has an excellent for sale book entitled **Your**

Florida Guide to Shrubs. This book has pictures and detailed information on about 170 common Florida shrubs including hardiness zone recommendations. From north to south, Florida has 7 zones-8a,8b, 9a, 9b, 10a, 10b and 11 in Key West. Polk County is considered 9a, so stick with plants rated 9a or lower. Keep in mind that 9a plants in some cold spots in Polk County can be severely injured or killed in bad freezes, so you may want to use plants that are rated 7-8 thru10, such as dwarf yaupon holly (7a-10b), Florida anise (7a-10b), camellias (7a-9b), azaleas (7a-10a), crape myrtle (7a-9b), or pittosporum (8a-11) and many others. This book is available from the Polk County Master Gardeners at the Polk County Extension Office for \$20.

RIGHT PLANT, RIGHT PLACE MATCHING A PLANT TO SITE CONDITIONS

**by Anne Yasalonis,
FYN Program 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 place plants in the landscape that will not waste time, energy and money.

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.

For more information on Right Plant, Right Place contact the Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program at (863) 519-8677 ext. 121 or visit <http://polkfyn.ifas.ufl.edu>.

TRANSPLANTS FOR THE SPRING VEGETABLE GARDEN

Now is the time to start planning the spring vegetable garden. Hopefully the frosts and freezes are over for this year, but I would not count on it.



It seems to be more difficult than ever to find an acceptable transplant for the vegetable garden. If you are planning to use transplants in the spring garden, carefully look at them at the time of purchase for disease (fungus and bacterial), insects, viruses or nutritional problems. Some transplants come into the garden centers already infected.

Virus problems may take the form of a mosaic look on the leaves. I have seen tomato leaf curl virus, transmitted by whiteflies, on transplants in garden centers - leaves are distorted with yellow margins.

Fungus and bacterial infections take the form of brown or black necrotic spots. I commonly find bacterial leaf spot on tomato and pepper transplants in garden centers.

Another problem I see is transplants kept in the garden centers for longer than they should be and they become too large for the pot. Many people think that starting off with a large plant is an advantage, but because the plant has been kept in a small pot for too long, the potential production of the plant is compromised. I often see large tomato and pepper transplants in the big box stores as late as June. Not only are the plants too large to be very productive, but a June planting is the wrong time of the year.

Always look at the planting guides before buying plants. The Florida Vegetable Gardening Guide is available on my web site <http://polkhort.ifas.ufl.edu> on the A-Z Publications page under V for vegetables. This guide will tell you when and how to plant most common vegetable crops.

Based on the above, you may want to consider growing your own transplants. Now is time to start transplants such as tomato, peppers and eggplant for the spring garden. The process is quite easy. First, fill small pots or individual cell packs with a germination mix or a good potting soil available from most retail garden centers. Then, add two seeds to each pot or cell. Keep them moist and the seeds should germinate in a few days - remove one seedling if two survive. Some of the cell packs in garden centers have a clear plastic lid which creates a more desirable environment for seed germination - keep these out of the sun. It takes about 4-6 weeks to produce a tomato or pepper plant for transplanting.

MISC. FEBRUARY GARDENING

Vegetables to plant - We are rapidly running out of time for planting cool season vegetables. You can still plant beet, broccoli, carrots, cauliflower, celery, collards, endive, kohlrabi, lettuce, mustard, pea, potato, radish and turnip for the next couple of weeks. Towards the end of February, plant beans, cantaloupe, corn, cucumber, eggplant, luffa, pepper, pumpkin, squash, tomato, and watermelon. Keep in mind it is still possible to get a freeze in later February and early March.

Flowers to plant - Alyssum, aster, baby's breath, begonia, candytuft, carnation, calendula, coneflower, coreopsis, cosmos, dahlia, delphinium, dianthus, dusty miller, false heather, four o'clock, gaillardia, gaura, gazania, geranium, gerbera, godetia, Johnny-jump-up, lobelia, nasturtium, pansy, petunia, rose, salvia, snapdragon, Stoke's aster, sweet pea, veronica and yarrow.



Herbs to plant - Anise, basil, borage, chives, dill, fennel, lemon balm, mint, oregano, parsley, rosemary, sage, sweet marjoram, tarragon and thyme.

Termites - Now is the time of the year for subterranean termites to swarm. Homeowners sometimes have difficulties identifying ants and termites. Ants have elbowed antennae, a constricted waist and the front wings are larger than the rear wings. Termites have beaded antennae, a wide waist and wings which are of equal size. If you have questions, bring them to the office for me to look at.

Have a good gardening day,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David Shibles', written in a cursive style.

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

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

