

No Fabulous Foliage, But Fall Does Change Florida's Plants

BARTOW -- When there is a change in the season, there are also changes in plants. In the fall, deciduous plants lose their leaves and become dormant for the winter. Evergreen plants, those that do not lose all of their leaves in the fall, are also undergoing changes -- although you may not see signs of these changes.

Azaleas may lose a few leaves during this time of the year. Those leaves are the older ones on the stem near the center of the plant. They turn reddish and drop from the plant. Don't be alarmed by the loss of a few older azalea leaves from now until spring. However, if the younger leaves, those nearest the tip of the shoot, turn yellow or brown there is cause for concern. Poor drainage, lack of water or alkaline soils may cause this condition.

Be sure to keep azaleas and other ornamental plants watered during the dry weather that may occur from now until spring. Generally, azalea leaves will wilt indicating they need water. However, other ornamental plants don't show wilt symptoms when dry, so it becomes much more difficult to decide when to water these plants. They may exhibit drought symptoms such as leaf drop and browning of the leaf margins and leaf tips. To avoid leaf drop and browning, you will need to develop a feel for just when these plants need water. Many people over-water just to make sure.

Currently the University of Florida is working on economical in-ground moisture sensors, which will automatically turn on the irrigation when the soil is at a specific moisture level. These sensors can be strategically placed at various irrigation zones throughout the landscape. This technology should help save water and keep plants healthy.

Yellow leaves are showing up on camellias, cherry laurel and sweet olive. Again, as with azaleas, these are older leaves on the stem near the middle of the plant. It is normal for these leaves to drop from the plants from now until spring. Do not confuse scale damage on camellias for normal aging of leaves. Scale insects feed on the lower surface of camellia leaves causing them to become splotched with yellow.

The leaves of sycamore trees have changed from green to brown. Although this phenomenon occurs every year, it is not caused by a change in day length or temperature and is therefore not considered a true seasonal change. The change in color is the result of sycamore lace bug feeding on the leaves. By the time the damage is visible, there is little that can be done to correct the problem. However, this problem will take care of itself since sycamore trees will soon be dropping their leaves.

Although Florida is not known for exciting fall color, there are enough temperate plants to provide some fall color. Many of the pigments that contribute to the bright colors of autumn are present in the leaves from the time they unfold in the spring. During spring and summer the green pigment (chlorophyll) dominates the other pigments and is the major visible color for vigorously growing plants. In the fall, the production of new

chlorophyll slows and is finally depleted, allowing the other pigments to become more evident.

The orange-, red-, yellow- and brown-colored leaves are expressions of the carotenoid pigments. The red, blue and purple anthocyanin pigments are responsible for the red and purple color of dogwoods, sweet gum, red maple, Bradford pear, Loblolly bay and crape myrtles.

Lawn grasses also experience some seasonal changes. Much to the delight of most of us, the growth rate of lawn grasses decreases in the fall. Although this slow growth means less mowing is required, it also means that lawns will not be as attractive as they were during the spring and summer. Because of the reduced growth rate, grasses cannot produce enough new leaves to replace the leaves that are dying naturally or being damaged by foot traffic.

Bermuda grass and centipede grass will turn brown with the arrival of the first frost. St. Augustine grass will turn purplish as a result of cool temperatures and light frost. With freezing temperatures, St. Augustine grass will turn brown in unprotected areas

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Posted – Polk Voice - **October 11, 2006 10:20:53 AM**