Color Your Winter Landscape

This is probably the toughest time of year to have color in the north Florida landscape. But it’s still possible.

You can start with the lawn. Most of our permanent warm-season lawn grasses have turned brown by now and will stay that way until at least March. Even St. Augustine grass lawns, which tend to stay somewhat green during the winter, look a little dull now. A quick, relatively inexpensive solution to the dull winter lawn is to overseed your permanent lawn with ryegrass. First mow your lawn just a little lower than you normally mow it. Then spread about ten pounds of ryegrass seed using a cyclone or rotary seed or fertilizer spreader—it isn’t possible to spread the seed evenly by hand.

After sowing the ryegrass seed, water the lawn well. Water again after a few days when the soil surface dries out. Within several weeks you will have a bright green lawn. A word of caution, though…don’t overseed more lawn than you want to keep mowed through the winter. You will continue mowing the ryegrass until the permanent lawn grass resumes growth in the spring and overtakes the ryegrass. The bright green lawn makes a picture-perfect setting for the winter and early-spring flowering plants in your landscape.

If you have sunny beds in your landscape, you can add flower color with pansies, violas and panolas. Complement the pansies with ersimums, dianthus, nemesia, diascia and ornamental cabbage,

Photo: David Marshall.

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Proper Pest Management

The solution to a pest problem should never start with the application of any type of product, especially a chemical. Many times chemicals are applied based solely on symptoms, such as leaf discoloration or a hole in plant tissue.

The first step in solving a pest problem is to properly identify the cause of the problem. Although this is not always a simple task, the end result saves time, money and protects the environment from the possibility of chemical runoff or leaching. Not to mention that you may not have to handle a pesticide.

Not all plant damage is the result of an insect. Some plant problems are caused by disease organisms, nutrient deficiencies, environmental factors such as changes in temperatures or moisture, and even improper cultural practices. Also, some insects are misidentified as harmful when they are truly helpful to your landscape.

After the pest has been accurately identified we should decide if the pest numbers are high enough to warrant a control measure. In the landscape, plants can tolerate a few pests. If pest numbers are low or below the established pest threshold, no chemical treatment is needed. Also, if a large number of predators, such as lady beetles or lacewings are present on the plant, treatment can also wait. Give beneficial organisms the opportunity to keep pest levels at a tolerable level.

If pest numbers are high and treatment is necessary, choose the least toxic product you can find for the job. Also, spray only the affected area to help preserve the good organisms that are living in your landscape.

We can complain because rose bushes have thorns, or rejoice because thorn bushes have roses.

—Abraham Lincoln

Chinese Tallow: A Deceptive Beauty

Chinese tallow (Sapium sebiferum), more commonly known as popcorn tree, has beautiful fall color, a fast growth rate and few pest problems. These qualities make it seem to be the ideal landscape tree. However, it is highly invasive.

Native to China, it’s believed the Chinese tallow was introduced to Charleston, South Carolina in the late 1700’s. Chinese tallow has now spread from South Carolina to Florida and west to Texas. This tree is threatening both agricultural production areas and native plant communities.

Chinese tallow has been found to be a problem in lowland areas—sometimes growing in the waters edge of a lake. On some wet sites, the popcorn tree will outcompete native trees and shrubs becoming the dominant species. This plant survives well in both poorly drained freshwater and saline soils.

The invasive nature of this tree has resulted in the disruption of native ecosystems, reducing habitat and food sources for native wildlife. And, although its berries may be a food source for some birds, it could be harmful to many aquatic species.

It’s difficult to talk people into removing attractive trees that are often major features in their landscape.

But the Chinese tallow’s beauty is deceptive.

In Florida, Chinese tallow was added to Rule Chapter 5B-57 as a prohibited noxious plant. As a result, the sale and distribution of this tree has not been permitted since January 1, 1998.

For additional information on this invasive tree, including its biology, control and suggested replacement trees, contact your local UF/IFAS Extension Office or visit http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/AG148.

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Witches’ Brooming

A few weeks ago I got a phone call from a homeowner who wanted to know why her shrubs were dying. She described the problem as a tuft of growth that turned brown and had small leaves growing out of the tufts.

The plants were Ligustrums. And it turns out the tufts were small clusters of galls on the plant.

The galls were caused by a fungus, *Sphaeropsis tumefaciens*. This is also known as witches’ brooming. Many plants in the panhandle are susceptible to this disease, including oleander, holly, hawthorn, bottlebrush, citrus, Carissa, crape myrtle, Prunus species and Ligustrum. Common holly species are very susceptible and are often severely damaged by this disease.

There are many unusual kinds of woody stem distortions that are called witches’ broom. When something causes the growing tip to die or become distorted, the buds below may produce a tight cluster of shortened stems.

Humid weather and wet foliage are needed for the fungus spores to germinate and the infection to occur. This is why it is important to keep irrigation water off shrubs as much as possible. Shoots and branches can become infected through wounds or pruning cuts.

Avoid pruning during times when rainfall is expected within 24 hours before or after pruning. To prevent infection of unaffected plant parts, dip pruning tools in a disinfectant such as 10% bleach or rubbing alcohol before using them on any other branch.

Prune branches at least 6 inches below where symptoms are seen. Look at the cut end of the stem to see if any discoloration from the fungal growth in the wood is noticed—if this is noticed prune that branch back further. Severely infected plants should be removed and destroyed. No chemical fungicides are available to control witches’ broom.

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Make Composting A New Year’s Resolution

What better New Year’s resolution could there be than to start recycling and doing your part to preserve our natural resources? By composting yard and kitchen waste, you can also get a jump start on your spring gardening by creating your own mulch and fertilizer. Done properly, raw compost material can transform into nutrient-rich soil in just six weeks! A free source of “slow release” nutrients, compost also loosens tight, compacted soils and helps our often-sandy soils hold nutrients.

What is compost? Essentially, it is what’s left of organic matter after microbes have thoroughly decomposed it. Among the compostable organic materials close to home are leaves, grass clippings, twigs, pine straw and vegetable/fruit peelings and coffee grounds from the kitchen. Alternate using brown (leaves, straw) and green materials (grass clippings, vegetables) in your compost bin to provide adequate carbon and nitrogen. Table scraps containing meat, eggs or oils are not recommended because they can draw rodents and cause an odor. Eggshells are okay, but in general, use only kitchen scraps that are either plants or paper.

The organisms doing the actual composting are microscopic bacteria and fungi, along with earthworms. The microbes need water, oxygen and nutrients to thrive. Rainfall will provide most of the needed moisture, although you may need to hand water the pile during dry times. For the best results, keep the pile moist but not soggy. If you pick up a handful it should neither crumble away nor drip water when squeezed.

Move oxygen through the pile to increase decomposition and prevent odors, by turning the pile on a regular basis with a pitchfork or rake. Some companies sell compost bins in moving cylinders that can be turned with a handle. The process of decomposition will generate extreme heat (over 150°F in the summer) within the pile, which can kill weed seeds and disease-causing organisms.

Done correctly, composting does not smell bad, is very easy to do, and is a great way to do something good for the planet, your yard, and your wallet! For directions on building a compost bin, contact your local extension office and ask for the publication *Construction of Home Composting Units* or see it online at [http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/HE026](http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/HE026).

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cold damage

Most of our home gardeners have little to worry about regarding cold damage to vegetables, as most of our vegetables in the ground now are cold-hardy down to the low 20's. Vegetables such as collards, mustard and turnip greens actually gain better flavor by enduring frosts in the 30’s temperature range. Strawberries will take low temps as long as blooms are not present. Resist the temptation to go out and prune away damage to the tips of plants that had some frost and have not restored the full green color.

If expecting temps in the low 30’s or below, measures such as icing should be taken to save the plants, and hopefully, the first crop. Icing consists of spraying the plants while the air temperatures are dropping into the low 30's until the air or ambient temperatures go below 32ºF. You will get protection from (1) water soaking the ground and releasing heat back into the atmosphere, as even 5 degrees warmer will provide some help, and (2) the leaves and stems coated with the ice at 32 or below will not drop down any further (like wearing a good coat) and that helps protect the plant. Cloth row covers also provide 4 to 5ºdegrees of protection.

While the Panhandle and Big Bend areas of Florida are known for their balmy breezes and warmer weather, it sometimes gets cold here in December, January and February. Sometimes we get freezes for a day long period, not just an hour or two. When hardened landscape or vegetable plants freeze, the first impulse of some homeowners is to get out the pruning tools and cut away dead or dying leaves and branches. But this is not a good idea. As a rule, you cannot tell how much damage has been done until the plants start new growth in the late winter.

The eastern redbud, another native tree, usually blooms in late February. The pink flowers stand out in the late winter landscape and are a sure sign that spring is just around the corner. It is a fast-growing small tree, growing to only 20-30 feet tall. It is tolerant to a wide range of soil types, including dry sites.

Among the showiest trees to bloom this time of year are some of the deciduous or oriental magnolias. These include the saucer magnolia (Magnolia x soulangiana), Yulan magnolia (Magnolia denudata), and the Gresham hybrid magnolias such as Pink Goblet, Jon Jon, Sayonara, Full Eclipse, and Winelight. There is also the “Little Girl” series of hybrids: Ann, Betty, Judy, Randy, Ricky, Susan, Jane and Pinkie.

Taiwan cherry (Prunus campanulata) also brightens the landscape this time of year with its dark pink flowers. A slender tree, up to about 25 feet tall, it is the best pink flowering cherry for our area. Okame cherry, a hybrid between Taiwan and Fuji cherry, blooms just a little later than Taiwan cherry and has more of a true pink flower color. It also tends to grow a little wider than Taiwan cherry.

You may notice a yellow-flow ering vine this time of year in the woods. It’s Caroline jasmine (Gelsemium sempervirens), a very fragrant, native vine. You can buy it at most nurseries if you would like to add one to a fence or trellis in your own landscape.

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kale or mustard. You can also grow any of these in pots on sunny patios or decks. Other good choices for pots in sunny spots include petunias, dwarf snapdragons and verbena.

This is a great time of year to be a Camellia lover. Visit your local garden centers now and select one or more of these large winter-flowering shrubs while they’re in bloom. The ideal location for a camellia will have partial or light shade, especially shade from the harsh afternoon summer sun, and well-drained soil. Avoid planting in poorly drained soils where water tends to stand in the hole.

The red flowers and seeds of red maple usually appear by mid-February if not earlier. This relatively fast-growing native tree matures at about 75 feet tall. It’s a good choice for moist soils. Avoid planting it on dry, sandy sites though.

Photo: David Marshall.
or early spring. You may cut away live wood or other plant tissue that could be saved. The dead plant tissue (in place) helps the rest of the plant survive subsequent frosts and freezes throughout the months of December and January at the minimum. If you have questions about cold-hardiness of a plant, contact your local extension office.

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### Fertilizer Ordinance and Phosphorus Rule Update

Turfgrass. Lawns. Golf courses. While it’s clear that this is a time for change and that our environment has been jeopardized by the realities of urbanization, Floridians need to be aware of the science relating to turf and our urban environment. They need to know that lawns and golf courses actually replenish and recharge our ground water, clean our urban environment in the wake of storm-water runoff, and provide many other scientifically documented benefits to our environment. They need to know about the cooling, oxygen replenishment, heat reduction, and fire break attributes of our green turf areas. Our world without turfgrass would not be the welcome environment that some may envision.

Can fertilization of turfgrass cause pollution? You bet! But only if we apply fertilizer incorrectly—at excessive rates or right before a heavy rainfall. Properly applied fertilizer, as verified by numerous studies at land-grant universities nationwide, will virtually all be taken up by the turf. Fertilizer granules, on the other hand, left on sidewalks or driveways, will almost surely wind up down the storm drain and into the nearest water body. High rates of nitrogen or phosphorus fertilizer will surely move past the root zone or run off into water bodies. It’s all in the application. Thus, we should not really be surprised that many local governments are currently drafting ordinances to regulate use of fertilizer. And perhaps the state is actually overdue in passing a fertilizer rule to regulate what constitutes an “urban turf” fertilizer.

Let’s discuss the current state of these actions. First, the state rule used sound science and input from the turf scientists at the University of Florida in writing the rule, while many local ordinances did not use or consider these data. Secondly, the intent of the state rule is to limit labeling, which should primarily have an impact on retail fertilizer sales to homeowners. Third, there is no enforcement of use of fertilizer in the state rule, while most of the local ordinances attempt to consider enforcement and penalties. Let’s consider both of these and the potential impact of their actions on commercial lawn care and pest control.

The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) has authority over labeling and marketing of all fertilizers. In 2005, the FDACS Bureau of Compliance Monitoring was instructed by the former governor’s office to develop a fertilizer rule to limit phosphorus (P) use in “urban agriculture” (lawns and golf courses) in the Everglades area. This was expanded to cover the entire state shortly after discussions to enact this got underway. Soon after that, the rule was further expanded to include nitrogen (N) as well.

Here are some of the specifics of the rule:

The rule defines what labels will be allowed to say for any fertilizer sold in Florida for use on lawns or urban turf. It specifically limits the amount of P that can be applied to 0.25 lbs. of P₂O₅ per 1,000 square feet for any single application and 0.50 lbs. of P₂O₅ per 1,000 square feet annually. Due to the low P requirement of turfgrass and the generally ample availability of P in our soils, this should pose very little problem for lawn maintenance.

The rule also states that nitrogen usage will follow specific instructions outlined in the fact sheet “Figuring out Fertilizer for the Home Lawn” (ENH962), authored by myself and Dr. Unruh. This fact sheet is available at http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu or at www.yourfloridalawn.ifas.ufl.edu. Listed in this paper are the recommended annual N rates for the various lawnggrass species for north, central, or south Florida.

The fertilizer rule is primarily targeted at “specialty bags of fertilizer”, those bags that are 49 lbs. or less. This means that the primary target is the customer who buys fertilizer at the retail store.

And, of course, there are exceptions to the rule. Newly planted turf areas have 12 months to establish before they need to conform to these stipulations, but, again, common sense should be followed when maintaining newly planted areas. It is widely acknowledged that newly planted turf will show the greatest leaching losses.

Remember, as we all strive to be in compliance and be certified and still keep lawns healthy and green, there

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is going to be a learning curve. Additionally, by the time this article is in print, the statewide Fertilizer Task Force may have made their recommendations relative to a statewide fertilizer ordinance. Perhaps that will actually be a good thing—we only hope that it will follow the science.

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Pruning Your Muscadines Vines

The optimum time to prune your muscadine vines is in the winter when they are dormant. Pruning of the past seasons growth must be done each winter to ensure a high quality crop with vigorous growth.

Pruning is done to keep a good balance between vine vigor and fruit production. Two fundamental parts of pruning are vine shaping and growth regulation. Pruning in November or December can increase the chance of winter injury. For this reason, the best time to prune is mid-January to mid-March.

After a Muscadine vine has been trained to a desired design, it must be pruned to keep it manageable and to ensure maximum vine performance. You want to cut off 70 to 90 percent of last year’s growth. The shoots of muscadine grapes arise from buds in the leaf axils of the past seasons growth. The fruit of muscadine grapes is borne on the current year’s growth. Flowers appear after several weeks of shoot growth, usually in late April. A good recommendation is to prune the previous year’s growth back to 2 to 4 nodes (A bud develops everywhere a leaf was attached last year). Prune out lateral branches every 6 inches or leave a hand width between each branch. Remember to always remove excess tendrils to prevent girdling of the vine.

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Diascia

Although annual and perennial diascias had, already been discovered and classified by several botanists visiting South Africa much earlier. In the beginning of the last century most British gardening encyclopedias listed just one diascia—Diascia barberae—derived from seed collected by Col. J. H. Bowker and sent by Mrs. Barber to Kew Gardens, England, in 1870.

A dainty, little annual, Diascia barbara, is not a very showy flower, but one which will appeal flower lovers. The flowers are rosy pink with yellow-green spots in the throat. The flowers are lipped but have two spurs on the lower lips, and are sometimes called twinspur.

It was not until John Kelly was given a plant called Diascia cordata by Edrom Nurseries in 1971 that anything notable happened to diascias again. He took pollen from his Diascia cordata and applied it to one flower of Diascia barberae. Of the nine seeds he obtained, just one was worthy of attention. He named it Diascia ‘Ruby Field’ (not for the color of the flowers, but for a lady who devoted her live to the long-term care of deprived children).

Despite the popularity of this new, hardy hybrid, little more happened with diascias for yet another decade.

The boom in the diascia trade began only recently. Today’s diascia offers larger flowers, larger plants with a more open growth habit and colors ranging from scarlet to salmon and coral to pink. They bloom throughout the cooler weather and may behave as a perennial in warmer sites.

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Garden Tips for January and February

Flowers

- Tulips, crocuses, and hyacinths can be planted in January if they have been chilled in the refrigerator for 60 days at 40°F. These plants are usually only good for one season. They typically do not build up enough energy to bloom a second time. Plant bulbs at recommended depths, with points facing up.
- There’s still time to plant some cool season annuals such as carnations, foxglove, nemesia, pansies, petunias and snapdragons. All need a well-drained site and four to six hours of full sun a day.
- Re-fertilize cool season flowerbeds, using a liquid or dry form of fertilizer.
- In February, prepare flowerbeds for spring planting by adding and incorporating soil amendments like mushroom compost, manure or homemade compost. Till or spade the bed to incorporate the amendments with the existing soil to a depth of 6 to 8 inches. Allow the prepared bed to lie undisturbed for 3 to 4 weeks before planting. This provides time for some important biological activity to take place, and new plants are less likely to suffer from stem and root rots as a result. Have a soil test done and only apply lime if the need is indicated by the test.
- Prune rose bushes in early February. For more information on how to grow roses, request the publication Growing Roses in Florida from your extension office or visit http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/EP339.

Trees and Shrubs

- Florida’s Arbor Day is the third Friday of January. Celebrate by planting a native tree in the right place. For a list of recommended trees, request the publication Native Trees for North Florida from your local extension office or visit http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/EP007.
- Prune dormant shade trees, if needed. For information on pruning techniques, request the publication Pruning Landscape Trees and Shrubs from your local extension office or visit http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ MG087.
- Prune summer flowering deciduous shrubs such as althea and hibiscus. Since they flower on current season’s growth, flowering can actually be enhanced by proper pruning.
- Do not prune spring flowering shrubs yet. Azaleas, spiraeas and forsythia flower during early spring because buds were formed last summer and fall. Pruning in February would remove most of the flower buds.
- Cold damaged trees and shrubs should not be pruned until new growth appears. You want to preserve as much healthy plant material as possible.

Fruits and Nuts

- Citrus may need protection from extreme cold. Kumquats and satsumas can survive temperatures in the low 20’s if they are dormant. Other citrus types won’t tolerate such cold temperatures. For more information on cold protection, request the publication Cold-Hardy Citrus from your local extension office or visit http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ MG074.
- Apply dormant oil spray to peach, plum, nectarine and other deciduous fruit trees to help control scale insects.
- Prune dormant fruit trees if needed.
- In January, plant fruits such as apples, peaches, nectarines, plums, pears, figs, pecans, blueberries, blackberries, grapes and persimmons. For more information on which varieties are best for north Florida, request the publication Deciduous Fruits for North Florida from your local Extension Office or visit http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ MG211.

Vegetable Garden

- Start seeds of warm season vegetables in late January in order to have transplants in March.
- Cool season vegetables that can still be planted in the garden are: beets, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, celery, Chinese cabbage, kale, kohlrabi, leek, mustard, bunching onions, parsley, English peas, Irish potatoes, radishes and turnips.
- Irish potatoes can be started from January through March by planting seed pieces 3 to 4 inches deep in rows. Always purchase certified seed potatoes.
- Prepare spring vegetable and herb beds for planting by adding and incorporating soil amendments like mushroom compost, manure or homemade compost. Wait 3 to 4 weeks before planting.

Lawns

- Check soil moisture during winter and water as needed.
- Hold off on fertilizing the lawn. It is still too early for an application of nitrogen containing product. Cold temperatures and lack of plant response would likely result in wasted fertilizer. However, your winter weeds would benefit greatly.

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