

# Green Garden News

## New Red Verbenas Arrive This Spring

Red is a color that evokes excitement and passion, so 2007 should stir a frenzy in the gardening soul of any verbenas lover. Four new red verbenas are making their debut this spring, and all of them are vegetatively propagated, or not grown from seed.

Fuego is a relatively new series coming from a company called Selecta First Class. The new Fuego orange red verbenas are as hot and fiery looking as a European sports car. The Fuego is great in mixed containers or the landscape. There are seven colors in the Fuego series.

Tukana scarlet verbenas are more spreading and vigorous than the Fuego, but it has some of the same orange hues. There are five colors in the Tukana series. I have seen great patriotic displays using this one in combination with the new white selection of cleome called Spirit Frost and the spiky textured Angel Face Wedgwood Blue angelonia. All three of these are coming from Proven Winners.

Magalena Ultra Scarlet verbenas come in the same hue. It is also vigorous and spreading but lower growing



than the Tukana. It is the perfect complement to yellow flowers for a sizzling landscape and is well suited for use in mixed containers. The Magalena is available in more than a dozen colors and is coming from S & G Flowers.

The Aztec Cherry Red verbenas are a true, saturated red with no orange overtones. It might remind you of the red in our flag. For this reason, it too is perfect for a patriotic display combined with Mystic Spires Blue salvia and Abunda Giant White Bacopa. There are 14 colors in the Aztec series that is coming from Ball FloraPlant. The Aztec series reaches about 10 to 12 inches tall spreading to 18 inches.

All of these verbenas are great for the back yard wildlife habitat in that butterflies and hummingbirds find them delectable and deer usually avoid them.

Your happiness with any verbenas will depend on proper soil preparation. Add 3 to 4 inches of organic matter and till it to a depth of 8 to 10

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# April Gardening Tips

## Flowers

- Begin watching roses for black spot fungus disease (small black spots on the leaves that quickly worsen). Control it by spraying every seven to ten days with a fungicide.
- Annuals to plant include celosia, coleus, dusty miller, gaillardia, geranium, hollyhock, impatiens, marigold, nicotiana, ornamental pepper, penta, phlox, portulaca, rudbeckia, salvia, sweet William, torenia, verbena, vinca and zinnia.

## Trees and Shrubs

- Fertilize shrub beds, if necessary. A landscape/garden type fertilizer that is low in phosphorus (the middle number) can be used on most species of shrubs. Keep lawn “weed and feed” type products out of shrub and flowerbeds. Some contain chemicals that are dangerous to woody and herbaceous ornamentals.
- The “acid loving” shrubs such as azaleas, camellias and gardenias should be fertilized with an “azalea-camellia special.” The nitrogen source in these fertilizers is safer on these ornamentals.
- Evergreen and semi-evergreen trees such as live oak and laurel oak shed most of their leaves during March and early April. Make plans to recycle these leaves on your property by composting or using them as mulch in vegetable, flower and shrub beds.

## Vegetable Garden

- Vegetables that can be planted outdoors include bush beans, pole beans, cantaloupe, sweet corn, cucumbers, eggplant, lima beans, okra, southern peas, peppers, pumpkin, summer squash, tomatoes, and watermelon.
- Plan and plant an herb garden. They can be grown under the same conditions and cultural practices that are used for vegetables.
- Sweet potato plants (slips, draws) can be set out from now through June.

## Lawns

- Remove fallen leaves from the lawn before the first mowing. Remove excessive leaf cover from the lawn by raking, blowing or bagging.
- Recycle grass clippings by not catching them

when the lawn is mowed. Removing the clippings carries off fertilizer that has been applied to the lawn.

- Service the lawn mower, which includes sharpening the blade and setting the correct cutting height for your kind of grass.
- Make a spring fertilizer application. Use a slow release nitrogen product with a 3-1-3 ratio (like a 15-5-15) or a 1:0:1 ratio such as a 15-0-15.
- Centipede is especially sensitive to excessive amounts of nitrogen. Lawns of this grass “crash” after two or three years of heavy fertilization. High soil nitrogen is believed to contribute to centipede decline – a major problem in our area.
- Spring dead spots may be present. Before treating these areas, get a diagnosis. Treat, if necessary, and then patch these areas before weeds invade the bare spots. Sodding, plugging or sprigging helps them to fill in quicker.

## Managing Tough Perennial Weeds

Florida Betony, Virginia buttonweed, dollarweed and several other perennial broadleaf and grassy weeds have invaded many homeowners’ lawns and flowerbeds. Without an understanding of the biology and growth habits of these weeds, most homeowners have little success in controlling them once they have gotten a stronghold in their landscape.

The key to managing such aggressive and invasive species is to be diligent in scouting for their initial encroachment and taking action before they become so widespread that moving may be the only option of escape. This includes being very careful when purchasing or swapping plant material such as sod or ornamentals to be sure it is free of these weeds.

In the lawn, we still have effective chemicals that can be applied to control most of these weeds, but once they encroach into flowerbeds it often comes down to physically pulling them out by hand. For most of these weeds this is only a temporary fix as underground tubers, roots, etc. quickly sprout new shoots with even a thicker density than before.

Learn to identify such weeds. If you don’t recognize a new one you discover, pull it up and have the Extension Service identify it for you. Develop a strategy for controlling weeds in your landscape that includes both pre-emerge and post emerge herbicides, but most importantly maintain a good sanitation program.

# Proper Mowing is the Key to a Quality Lawn

Proper mowing practices can determine the success or failure of a lawn. Improper mowing can ruin a lawn in a hurry. Mowing correctly, however, can help you overcome many lawn problems. The two most important aspects of proper mowing are cutting height and frequency.

How high and how often you cut your grass is determined by the type of grass you have. A grass that naturally has a more horizontal growth habit can be mowed shorter than a naturally upright type. Grasses with narrow blades can generally be mowed shorter than grasses with wider blades. Bermudagrass, because of its numerous narrow leaf blades and low growth habit, can be mowed at a low height. On the other hand, bahiagrass should be mowed higher because of its upright growth habit.

Each time your grass is mowed, it endures a physiological stress. This is especially true if too much leaf blade is removed. Lawngrasses make their own food through a process called photosynthesis. To absorb needed sunlight for this process, a good healthy leaf surface is required. Mowing below the recommended height decreases the total leaf area and the plant's ability to produce enough food to meet its needs. One of the leading causes of dead areas in lawns is mowing too low.

Mowing also directly influences the depth of grass roots; the higher the mowing height, the deeper the roots. A deep root system is vital to a healthy lawn. The advantages of a deep root system are greater tolerances to drought, insects, disease, temperature stress and traffic.

The recommended mowing height for centipede grass is between 1½ to 2 inches. St. Augustine grass and bahiagrass should be mowed between 3 to 4 inches. However, the new semi-dwarf varieties of St. Augustine grass can be mowed lower with a recommended height of ap-

proximately 2½ inches.

During stressful conditions such as heat, drought or extensive shade raise your mowing height to the upper limit of the recommended range or even slightly higher.

How often you cut your grass is determined by the growth rate of the grass. In other words, the decision to mow should be based on the amount of growth since the last cutting rather than the number of days that have elapsed.

Mow often enough so that no more than one-third of the blade height is removed per mowing. It is important to always leave as much leaf surface as possible for photosynthesis to provide food for regrowth. For example, if your St. Augustine grass lawn is regularly mowed to a height of three inches, the grass should be cut when it reaches 4 to 4½ inches.

One of the most damaging mowing practices is a sudden reduction in mowing height. If your lawn has been allowed to get too tall you should gradually lower its height with several mowings.

Should you bag or leave your clippings? On most lawns, it is not necessary to bag your grass clippings. Leaving the grass blades helps recycle nutrients to the soil. If your lawn is not overfertilized and is mowed frequently enough, the clippings will be beneficial. Contrary to popular belief, research has shown that clippings are usually quickly decomposed by soil microorganisms and do not contribute to thatch. Problems can occur if piles of clippings are left on the grass surface. If this happens, spread the clippings out by raking lightly or using a leaf blower to distribute them.

—by Theresa Friday, Extension Faculty-Residential Horticulture, UF/IFAS Santa Rosa County Extension



# Upcoming Events

**Plant Clinics:** Having problems with your lawn or plants? If so, take advantage of diagnostic plant clinics offered by the UF/IFAS Santa Rosa County Extension and the Santa Rosa County Master Gardeners. Plant clinics are now offered at all three Santa Rosa County Extension Offices.

In Milton, the plant clinic will be conducted every Monday during the spring and summer from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Extension office located at 6263 Dogwood Drive, Milton.

In Gulf Breeze, the plant clinic is conducted every Tuesday from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. year round. The clinic is held at the South Santa Rosa Service Center located at 5841 Gulf Breeze Parkway (next to The Zoo on Hwy 98).

In Jay, the plant clinic will be staffed by Santa Rosa County Master Gardeners on the first and third Monday of each month from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. during the spring and summer months. The clinic will be held at the Extension Office located in the Jay Community Center at 5259 Booker Lane, Jay.

**April 21, 2007: Okaloosa County Master Gardener Annual Spring Plant Sale.** NW Florida Fairgrounds. 1958 Louis Turner Blvd. Ft. Walton Beach. 8:00 AM to noon.

**April 28, 2007: Wildlife Sanctuary of Northwest Florida Annual Baby Shower and Open House.** Noon to 3:30 PM. 105 North "S" Street, Pensacola.

**May 3, 2007: Panhandle Butterfly House Opens.** Located in Navarre Park at the north end of the Navarre Bridge on Hwy 98. It will be open to the public on Thursdays-Saturday from 10:00 AM to 3:00 PM and on Sundays from noon to 4:00 PM.

**May 12, 2007: 7th Annual Emerald Coast Secret Garden Tour.** There will be six gardens featured on this year's tour. The tour is located in southeast Pensacola on either end of Bayou Texar. Tickets are available at the Garden Center located at 1850 North 9th Avenue in Pensacola on Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 10:00 AM to 3:00 PM. Tickets are \$8. For more information call 850-478-8944

For persons with disabilities requiring special accommodations, please contact the SRC Extension Office at least 5 working days prior to the program so that proper consideration may be given to the request.  
(850) 623-3868

# Volunteers Needed at Butterfly House

The Panhandle Butterfly House is looking for volunteers to act as docents and tour guides.

If you are looking for an opportunity to interact with the public, share your knowledge of butterflies and their host plants and provide children with a memorable, one-of-a-kind experience, then look no further. The Panhandle Butterfly House is the perfect place for you and we encourage you to volunteer.

Docents will staff the butterfly house for pre-scheduled shifts, welcome visitors and walk them through the house as they provide information



about the butterflies and plants that are on exhibit and answer questions.

Guides will be scheduled to lead group tours and provide hour-long educational tours to scheduled groups.

Prior experience as a guide is not required and an informative and fun training session will provide you with the information and skill you will

need to offer visitors a rewarding experience. The training will focus on operating procedures and interesting information on plants and butterflies.

For more information call Margaret at 939-3379, Karen at 939-9595 or the Santa Rosa County Extension Office at 623-3868.

# Questions and Answers

**Q:** Laurel and live oaks in our yard are dropping lots of leaves. Should I rake and bag them or let them be cut up when mowing? Can they be used as a mulch?

**A:** Too many leaves can suffocate a lawn, so it's best to rake them and, if possible, add them to the compost pile. A few leaves could be mulched at mowing time, but the thick layers that can form under oak trees would produce an excessive amount of organic matter if left on the lawn.

A two to three inch layer of leaves could be used as mulch under shrubs and perennial plantings. Too many leaves tend to repel water and keep it from reaching the root zones. Decomposing leaves may also bind up nutrients intended for the landscape plants. If the leaves are added to the compost pile to decompose, they eventually can be returned to the landscape as a much more useful soil additive that encourages plant growth.

**Q:** We purchased a century plant that keeps popping up pups everywhere. How can we get rid of them?

**A:** Maybe you could share them with friends or neighbors. Pups, or young offshoots, are the way the century plant ensures its future. The name suggests they live for 100 years, but their life span is more likely 10 years or so, at which time the original plant flowers and declines. The pups are then in place to ensure the next generation.

Removing the plant or cutting off the pups is the only practical methods of keeping it in bounds.

**Q:** We recently planted a citrus tree that has new growth and lots of flowers.

**A:** Even though the tree is full of great blooms and you would like some early fruits, it's best to remove all citrus that form for the first few years. The rewards for delaying fruit production are going to be a bigger tree with better crops.

**Q:** Workers caring for our community grounds use a string trimmer to remove the grass around palms, and as a result, the

bark is damaged. Is this damage harmful, and should I add a mulch barrier around the plants?

**A:** A ring of mulch is almost always a good idea around trees, shrubs and palms. It helps control weeds, keeps the soil moist and prevents errant string-trimmer damage.

Luckily, palms are not trees, and most of the tissue within the trunk is alive and conducting water up to the foliage and foods down to the roots. If your plant were a tree, the outer tissue just below the bark would be the only alive and active portion, and severe damage could result in the tree's death.

Although it's not a good idea to damage the outer barklike area of palms, the plants should be survivors. Regretfully, unlike trees, wounds on palm trunks do not heal. These injuries could make them more susceptible to pest attacks. It's a good idea to add the mulch to prevent further injury.

**Q:** What do the letters V.F.N and TSW mean following the name of tomato plants?

**A:** The letters listed next to the name of the tomato's name (for example VFN) indicate that this particular tomato variety is somewhat resistant to certain diseases. The letter V indicates resistance to Verticillium wilt, F for Fusarium wilt (two common fungus diseases in the soil) and N for nematode resistance. TSW indicates resistance to tomato spotted wilt virus.

These are naturally occurring disease problems in home gardens that can become bothersome when the same plants (and closely related relatives of tomatoes, like peppers and eggplants) are grown in the same soil year after year. It's a good idea to rotate where you plant tomatoes (and all crops for that matter) each year. Moving a crop, especially tomatoes, to another area of the garden each year helps greatly in reducing disease problems.

# Verbenas

*(Continued from page 1)*

inches. While doing this, spread 2 pounds per 100 square feet of a slow-release fertilizer like a 12-6-6, 8-8-8 or something fairly similar.

Provide full sunlight and water, and you are well on your way to enjoying one of the prettiest groups of flowers available. There is one more important aspect to happiness with verbenas. These are vigorous plants that spread exceptionally well. They bloom for weeks and weeks, and then get a little tired.

This is the time to cut them back, side-dress with a little fertilizer, and they will send out new runners and give more blooms. It is possible that you may need to do this twice in a long growing season, but that is how you have verbena blooms in spring, summer and fall. Leaving those long stems will promote problems and get where they look unsightly.

Try some of these new red verbenas this year, and you'll get passionate on gardening again.

—By Norman Winter, MSU Horticulturist  
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