

Extension Agents Must Stick to Science

As an Extension agent, it's common to be asked horticultural questions in some unusual places and circumstances. I once found myself fielding tree questions while at the emergency room - as a patient, and trying to concentrate on a vegetable producer's inquiries in the reception line at my wedding. I am not kidding.

This goes with the territory and as a public employee I am usually flattered to be recognized and associated with my profession. Unfortunately, when not in the work mode, the answer is sometimes not as complete as I would like it to be.

We are trained to avoid "shooting from the hip." You will rarely, if ever, hear your local Extension Agent say "this is the way that I do it," when asked to make a recommendation. Regardless of the topic, be it pest control, livestock nutrition or lawn fertilization, there must be some science to back up any answer that is provided.

The Extension Service is a part of the University of Florida and the U.S.D.A., and is charged with the responsibility of providing research-based information in the areas of agriculture, horticulture, youth development and family & consumer sciences. We do this in many ways including mass media, workshops, classes, gardening clinics and field days.

One example of the amount of science that is involved in a recommendation would be the development of a new insecticide. The commercial company that develops such a product would spend about 6 to 9 years and 10 million dollars in doing so. In the meantime, before it can be recommended by an Extension agent, it must undergo further testing by the land grant university system. Finally, if it is determined to be effective under our conditions and meet safety and environmental requirements, it might be placed on our list of recommended materials by state Extension specialists.

Another example would be the recommendation of a new landscape plant. Just because someone develops a new crape-myrtle cultivar, doesn't mean that it will automatically be included in our list. Florida conditions are different. We have milder winters and more pest pressure than most other locations. Therefore, any new crape-myrtle cultivar would undergo testing to see if it tolerates our hot, humid summers and mild winters, and to determine the degree of pest resistance.

Another reason that a quick answer is not always available is the number of gardening topics and the constantly changing and updating of information that occurs. "I don't know, but I'll find out and get back to you" is a phrase well known to Extension agents.

When you here this, please don't take it lightly, or assume that your Agent is avoiding the question. This means that references will be searched and often a University specialist or other resource person will be consulted. In addition, the final answer might involve choosing something practical from a variety of recommended practices or treatments and helping to find a source of the product that is required.

So, if you have ever felt like a quick and definitive answer to a question of your local Extension agent was not given, that's because information sometimes takes more time to find. Also, consider the circumstances. Call me at the office. If I don't know, I'll get back to you!