

Green Garden News

'Blankies' aren't as comforting to plants

Covering outdoor plants with blankets and plastic to protect them from the cold may make you feel better, but chances are it won't keep them cozy.

University of Georgia horticulturist Orville Lindstrom says although it's been done for years, giving your outdoor plants a blanket won't keep them warm unless you find a way to anchor it.

"Even if the covering stays on, a blanket on a plant isn't going to create heat as it does on a person," Lindstrom said. "We're warm-blooded, and we create heat. Plants aren't. The only heat available under the blanket would be coming from the soil."

Even if covering did work, Lindstrom says the wind usually works against your efforts by blowing your hard work away. Plus, using a blanket to cover your plants can also result in broken limbs.

"The added weight of the blanket can put pressure on the limbs and cause them to break," he said. "You have to weigh the risks. If you put up a large enough structure that will block the wind, it would help. But then you've all but built a mini-greenhouse."

If you really want to help your outdoor plants prepare for the cold, Lindstrom says the time to help is actually in the spring and summer.

"If you take good care of your plants in the warm months by keeping them insect-free, giving them ample water

and fertilizing them," he said, "you're helping build a hardier plant."

Because outdoor plants are out in the elements 24 hours a day, they adapt to temperature changes.

"When winter arrives, it's not a shock to them because they have gradually prepared for it," Lindstrom said. "Temperatures would have to drop below 20 degrees to damage the stem tissue of landscape plants."

If you want to "baby" your plants, save the special treatment for prized possessions such as a banana tree, he said. If it's a one-of-a-kind plant and you really don't want to lose it, build a makeshift shelter for it.

Lindstrom says container plants are the ones that need the "babying treatment."

"Container plants are especially susceptible to cold temperatures," he said. "Their roots are more exposed to the cold because they are above ground."

You can protect your container plants several ways. Place them inside your home, garage, greenhouse or shed. You can also push container plants together and mulch or cover the sides of the containers to decrease heat loss.

Plants growing close to the ground usually benefit from the heat radiating from the soil, he said. "Tall,

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January Gardening Tips

Flowers

- Refrigerated bulbs such as tulip, daffodil and hyacinth should be planted in prepared beds.
- Start seeds of warm season flowers late this month in order to have transplants in March.
- There's still time to transplant some cool season annuals such as carnations, foxglove, pansies, petunias and snapdragons.
- Fertilize cool season flowerbeds, using a liquid or dry form of fertilizer. Be careful not to apply excessive amounts and keep granules away from the base of stems.
- Finish dividing crowded perennials. Don't wait until spring for this job.
- Plant bare root roses immediately after they are purchased

Trees and Shrubs

- Plant trees and shrubs. This is an ideal time of year for transplanting larger specimens.
- Plant bare root plants such as deciduous ornamental shrubs and trees.
- Prune dormant shade trees, if needed.
- Stick hardwood cuttings of fig, grape, honeysuckle, althea, catalpa, forsythia and wisteria.

Fruits and Nuts

- Apply dormant oil spray to peach, plum, nectarine

and other deciduous fruit trees. This practice is necessary when growing the stone fruits in locations along the Gulf Coast. This also applies to the flowering peaches and cherries since they are susceptible to the same pests as their fruiting cousins.

- Plant bare root deciduous fruit trees.
- Prune dormant fruit trees if needed.

Vegetable Garden

- Start seeds of warm season vegetables late this month in order to have transplants in March.
- Lime (if needed), and begin preparing vegetable gardens for the spring planting.
- 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 three to four inches deep in rows. Always purchase certified seed potatoes.

Lawns

- Check soil moisture during winter and water as needed.

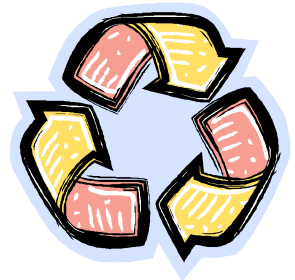
Recycle your organic Christmas Tree

The following Christmas tree drop off locations in Santa Rosa County will be available until January 31, 2006:

- Clean Community System
304 Park Ave., Milton
- Tiger Point Recreation
East of Wal-Mart on Hwy 98 Tiger Point
- Jay Transfer Station
Transfer Station Road, Jay

- Gulf Power Sub Station
East Spencerfield Rd, Pace

Mulch can be picked up at the Clean Community System on Park Ave., Milton and in back of the South Service Center on Hwy 98.



Stinkhorns are some wild and smelly fungi

Mushrooms are creating quite a stink in North-west Florida lately. A foul-smelling mushroom from the stinkhorn fungus is popping up in many landscapes.

Stinkhorns, which belong to an order of fungi that include puffballs, earthstars and the bird's nest fungi, produce mushrooms that smell like rotted meat. It's their putrid odor that motivates local residents to seek advice on control measures. But with the exception of the objectionable smell, stinkhorns are really not a problem.

There are hundreds of different types of mushrooms in Florida. Even though many of the mushrooms are very visible, they are only the reproductive parts of a fungus. The mushrooms grow from fine thread-like or root-like structures called mycelia, which normally go unseen. Mycellia can live for years in wood, living tissue or the soil.

The stinkhorn fungus is a decomposer. From this view point it is considered beneficial because it helps break down decaying plant material. Dr. Gary Simone, University of Florida Extension Plant Pathologist says, "Their ecological niche is one of composting grass, straw, wood chips or similar organic matter on the soil surface."

The wet, warm environment of the southeastern United States provides a perfect home for these mushroom-producing fungi. According to Simone, mushrooms are natural residents of Florida. Abundant rain, high humidity and warm, mild temperatures most of the year plus a wealth of decaying plant material adds up to fungi heaven.

Stinkhorn fungi start as white, egglike structures that are anchored to the soil by a root-like network. Only the top portion of the egg-like structure can be seen. Most of the "egg" is underground.

Simone says, "The egg-like structure contains a fully formed, miniature adult that is ready to expand to adult size upon the availability of water." It may only take an hour or so from the egg-rupturing stage to the mature stinkhorn fungus. Based on the

type of stinkhorn, the fruiting structure (mushroom) will be either column or stalk-like in shape or globular, lattice-like in shape. The mature mushroom varies in color, but most are pink to orange. They also vary from two to a little over six inches in height and from one-half to three inches in width. All of the stinkhorn mushrooms possess foul odors.

Various insects, including flies, are attracted to the scent of stinkhorn mushrooms. Flies feed on the spore slime. After dining, they depart and transport spores for this fungus to other locations.

Simone says, "Stinkhorn fungi do not cause disease -- in spite of their occurrence near declining trees and shrubs." He says that their colonies may extend in all directions around the visible mushroom and that they persist for a number of years until their food source is exhausted.

Most people I talk to about stinkhorns tell me the mushrooms are growing in an area where they



Photo by Beth Bolles

have used wood mulch. Mushrooms from the stinkhorn fungus are produced during cool, moist weather (fall through spring).

The following are stinkhorn management options by Simone:

Tolerance: Learn to live with them as they do represent beneficial organisms to the soil ecology in Florida. Keep windows closed during periods of mushroom production to minimize the odor problem.

Eradication: Hand-pick the "egg" stage before it ruptures and put it in a zipper bag in the garbage. Small or new colonies may be eradicated through the complete removal of an area of mulch to the depth of the native soil. No guarantees with this method.

Environment alteration: Use of non-mulch ground covers, such as ivy, jasmine, liriopse, mondo grass, etc., will serve to reduce stinkhorn incidence in a landscape. Distance large mulched areas away from the house. There are no legal effective or practical chemical control options.

—by Larry Williams, UF/IFAS Extension Faculty, Okaloosa County

Upcoming Events

Every Tuesday: *Plant Diagnostic Clinic.* This free clinic is open to the public from 9:00 am to 1:00 pm on Tuesdays at the South Santa Rosa Service Center at 5819 Gulf Breeze Pkwy.

If you are having problems with your lawn or plants, bring in a sample and an Extension Horticulturist or Master Gardener will be available to discuss your gardening questions. For more information about what type of sample to bring visit our website at <http://www.santarosa.fl.gov/extension/horticulture/diagnostics.html>.

January 2, 2006: *Extension Office closed*

January 16, 2006: *Extension Office closed*

January 28, 2006: *Gulf Coast Gardening from the Ground UP: "The GROUND floor"*. This free program is open to the public and will be presented at the Navarre Library at 8484 James M. Harvell Road, Navarre, FL. Registration opens at

1 p.m. and the program will start at 1:30 p.m. Larry Busbee, Santa Rosa County Master Gardener, will cover the basics of soil preparation, basic planting techniques, lawns and fertilizing.

February 2-4, 2006: *Gulf States Horticultural Expo and 2006 Trade Show*

Mobile Convention Center, Mobile AL

Details: <http://www.gshe.org/>

Phone: 334.502.7777

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

What to do with the Christmas Tree after Christmas

After the holidays, many municipalities allow old Christmas trees to be placed curbside. Trees are then collected and ground up for mulch or burned. If you miss the designated date, or your trash collector doesn't accept trees, there are several options to prolong the useful life of the tree.

An old Christmas tree can be used to benefit birds, fish, and the landscape by placing it in a corner of your deck, and spreading some birdseed nearby, or tying it to a deciduous tree or post near a bird feeder. The birds benefit from having escape cover nearby when hawks or cats threaten, and the dense boughs reduce the windchill on a cold night.

Sinking your Christmas tree in a pond is an easy way to improve fish habitat and fishing. The tree serves as little coral reef, in that the branches provide substrate for water plants to grow, and cover for minnows and other forms of small aquatic life. Larger fish are drawn by the shade and the presence of prey.

How do you sink a tree? Tie the base to a cinder block with a short, stout rope, and toss it in. Just be sure to get permission from the pond owner first!

Using the tree around the landscape requires clipping off all of the branches. Use the boughs to add extra insulation around semi-hardy perennials or to trees and shrubs that were recently planted. The leftover trunk may be used as a garden stake next spring. Or cut and let it dry for a few weeks, and you will have some easy lighting firewood. Just beware that most conifer species tend to spark and pop more than hardwoods, as resin pockets in the wood make tiny explosions. This can delight the youngsters, but for safety's sake keep an eye on the fire when burning Christmas tree logs!

—by Charlie Barden, Extension Forester, Kansas State University

Questions and Answers

Many homeowners include a planting of grapes within the landscape and this is the time of year that pruning concerns arise. Following are some common questions concerning grapes.

Q: Should grape vines be pruned every year?

A: Yes, grapes develop much vegetative growth over a single growing season and, if allowed to go unpruned, the vines tend to become crowded and production is reduced as a result.

Q: When is the best time to prune grapes?

A: Anytime from January until mid-March is an acceptable time.

Q: Every time that I have pruned my grapes, sap flows from them. Will this harm or kill the vines.

A: In grape pruning language, the loss of sap from freshly pruned vines is known as “bleeding.” It is not harmful if pruning is done when the plants are in a dormant condition.

Q: I become confused when faced with pruning grapes. There is usually so much growth to deal with. How can I decide what parts to cut off and what to leave?

A: The southern grapes, or muscadines, are pruned to a spur system with permanent arms. Assuming that you have the most commonly used two wire trellis setup, I suggest the following: First, locate the most vigorous main branch running in each direction on the wire. On a two wire system this would mean that there is a main trunk with a total of four branches - two running in opposite directions. Next, prune out all other large canes by tracing back to the trunk and removing them.

You will be left with these four main branches with many smaller branches growing from them at

approximately a ninety degree angle. Now, here is where many people make a mistake that costs a year’s worth of fruit. These side shoots should be pruned back, but not all the way to the main cane. When cutting, leave “spurs,” or short pieces of stem containing at least two buds.

When the job is properly finished, each vine will appear as a skeleton of its former self. There will be one major branch per wire, with short stubs of one to two inches in length where each side branch occurred.

The short pieces that are left are a portion of last years growth, and the buds that sprout will form the fruiting branches for the upcoming year. A word of warning: If the side shoots are pruned all the way back to the main canes, all of next year’s fruiting wood will be removed and you will not have grapes for 2 years!

Q: If I prune my grapes in mid-winter, would I be making them susceptible to cold damage.

A: No, grapes are very cold tolerant.

Q: Should I use pruning compound or wound dressing material on the cut surfaces.

A: No, cut surfaces will heal quickly once spring growth begins. Pruned grape vines usually bleed in our area, regardless of the time of year that cuts are made and the flowing sap is under pressure. It would simply push its way through, or around, any compound that is applied.

Q: How do I find out more about growing muscadine grapes?

A: Check out the UF/IFAS publication, “The Muscadine Grape” at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/HS100>.

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more open plants don't receive as much heat and are not as protected from the cold," Lindstrom said.

You won't truly know whether your protective efforts were successful until warmer weather arrives. Plants with cold-damaged roots may not show signs of injury until temperatures rise and the plant's demand for water from the roots is greater, Lindstrom said.

The overall key to making sure your landscape plants survive each winter is planting the right variety from the start.

"Don't just buy a plant you've heard about or one you think would do well in your landscape" he said. "Do a little research and make sure the plant you're buying is suited to your area. Then you can save your blankets for keeping your family warm."

—by Sharon Omahen, College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, University of Georgia



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