UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA
IFAS EXTENSION

A Gardening Newsletter

Santa Rosa County

Green Garden News

Florida Master Gardener Course

Do you enjoy helping others? Have you ever wanted to learn more about growing plants? Are you interested in fruits, vegetables, ornamentals or lawns? If you answered yes to these questions, your chance may be just around the corner.

A horticulture program, called Florida Master Gardener, is being offered by the UF/IFAS Santa Rosa County Extension Service to provide horticultural training for selected home gardeners in Florida.

Master Gardener is a title given to individuals who receive 50 hours of in-depth horticultural training from County Extension Agents and agree, in return, to give 50 hours of volunteer service helping their communities through their local county extension program.

Training will include topics such as basic plant science, entomology, plant pathology, vegetable gardening, fruit culture, turf management, integrated pest management, and identification and usage of common landscape plants.

Master Gardeners give their volunteer hours to county extension offices in various ways. In Santa Rosa County, Master Gardeners help extension personnel answer telephone calls, troubleshoot plant problems brought into the office, run soil samples, staff plant clinics and work with 4-H youth programs.

Applications for a limited number of openings in the class are now being taken in the Santa Rosa Extension office. Applications must be postmarked by November 15, 2005. Classes begin in January 2006. For further information or to request an application, contact the Santa Rosa County Extension office at 850-623-3868. If you live in Escambia county, contact Beth Bolles at 850-475-5230. In Okaloosa county, contact Larry Williams at 850-689-5850.

For more information on the Florida Master Gardener Volunteer Program visit their website at http://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/mg/volunteer.htm.

This program is open to anyone wishing to attend regardless of race, creed, color, sex, national origin, religion, age, disability, sexual orientation, marital status, political opinions or affiliations.

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September Gardening Tips

Flowers

- Cut back, and remove old flower stalks from flowering annuals and re-fertilize in order to obtain one more color before cool weather.
- Prepare beds for the planting of cool season annuals next month. Some plants to establish for fall, winter and early spring include: pansy, petunia, snapdragon, larkspur, stocks, statice, bachelor button, calendula, cleome, alyssum, marigolds, verbena, dianthus and candytuft.
- Divide perennials such as Shasta daisy, canna, amaryllis, daylily, coneflower, violets, and ornamental grasses like mondo grass and liriope.
- Cut strong stems of roses to encourage new growth for final flush of the year.
- Find a local source, or order wildflower seeds for fall planting. Be certain to choose a mixture that is specifically for the south. Prepare the area, but wait until November to seed them.

Trees and Shrubs

- *Last month* to fertilize woody ornamental shrubs in the landscape.
- No pruning unless it's absolutely necessary. This is probably the worst time of year to do major pruning of shrubs. Late summer/fall pruning can stimulate tender growth that might be damaged by low winter temperatures.
- Plant woody ornamentals, including trees, shrubs, vines and ground covers during the fall and early winter. They respond well to planting late in the year because our relatively mild winters allow for root growth. Fall planted shrubs, for example, are well on their way toward having their roots established before hot weather arrives next spring.
- Mature palms should receive a complete granular fertilizer formulated for palms ("palm special") three to four times during the growing season, beginning in March and ending in September.
- Select crape myrtles while in bloom.
- Examine the small twigs on the outer canopy of hardwood trees for black twig borer damage. Remove and destroy infested twigs.
- Pine needles fall during September and October. Rake and use them in the vegetable and flower garden as well as in shrub beds. Pine needles make excellent mulch. Apply generously to obtain a depth of 2 to 3 inches on the soil surface after they have settled.

Vegetable Garden

- Prepare the soil now, allowing about 3 weeks between the incorporation of amendments and planting. In September sow seeds of beets, broccoli, brussels sprouts, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, collards, endive, escarole, kale, kohlrabi, leek, lettuce, mustard, onions, parsley, radishes and turnips.
- Last planting of beans (bush, lima and pole), cucumbers and summer squash.
- Clean out the spring/summer vegetable garden once plants have stopped producing. Remove any that are known to have been diseased or heavily insect infested during the previous season.

Lawns

- Check the lawn weekly and watch for lawn pests especially Chinch bugs and sod webworms in St. Augustine, spittlebugs and sod webworms in centipedegrass and mole cricket damage in all grasses.
- Last month to fertilize bahiagrass, bermudagrass, St. Augustinegrass and Zoysiagrass using a complete fertilizer applied at no more than 1.0 lb nitrogen per 1000 square feet.

Gardening Web Site

If you are interested in local gardening information, be sure to surf the UF/IFAS Santa Rosa County Horticulture website. This website contains hundreds of articles written by local agents about gardening in Northwest Florida.

http://www.santarosa.fl.gov/extension/horticulture/index.html

Soil Moisture Monitors Help Sprinkler Systems Save Water, Money, Says UF Expert

The cost of keeping a lawn green could get lower, thanks to soil moisture monitors that make automatic sprinkler systems more efficient, says a University of Florida researcher.

The devices can cut sprinkler system water usage by more than half, according to a recent UF study. The findings were presented at the annual meeting of the American Society of Agricultural Engineers July 17-20 in Tampa.

Soil moisture monitors continuously check soil moisture levels and prevent sprinklers from operating when watering is not needed, said Michael Dukes, an assistant professor of agricultural engineering with UF's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences. The monitors are not widely used despite being available for more than a decade.

On average, U.S. homeowners use almost 50 percent more water outdoors than indoors, according to a 2000 report by the American Water Works Association. Because lawn care accounts for most outdoor water use, homeowners who reduce unnecessary irrigation can save big on water bills, he said.

Sometimes, reduced watering can even improve a lawn's health - overwatering encourages shallow root growth, which makes turfgrass less resistant to stress and more susceptible to some diseases, he said.

The soil moisture monitors Dukes tested are marketed as accessories for automatic sprinkler systems that use timers to schedule irrigation. These systems are convenient to use but often wasteful, he said.

"We conducted a survey of Florida homeowners from 2002 to 2004 that showed mostly-grass landscapes are typically given two-and-a-half times the water they need," he said. "The monitors we studied, priced from $75 to $350, could pay for themselves within one year in areas where the cost of water is high."

Dukes' six-month study evaluated four commercially available soil moisture monitors, using them with timer-based sprinkler systems on UF turfgrass research plots. For comparison, he also tested timer-based systems with no water-saving devices as well as systems equipped with shutoff devices called rain sensors.

Rain sensors are popular water-saving options for automatic sprinkler systems, but because they measure rainfall rather than soil moisture, they may not determine a lawn's water needs accurately, Dukes said.

The UF study showed systems equipped with soil moisture monitors used 56 percent less water on average than systems with rain sensors when the timers were set to water twice a week. Systems with the monitors used 70 percent less water on average than systems without water-saving devices on a twice-weekly watering schedule.

Use of the soil moisture monitors did not produce visible differences in turf quality, Dukes said.

The monitors are particularly suitable for residential landscape irrigation because they require little effort from homeowners, he said.

"For a timer-based system to be water-efficient in a climate like Florida's, it has to be adjusted seasonally to account for heavy rains in the summer and reduced water requirements in the winter," Dukes said. "Homeowners can avoid that inconvenience if the sprinkler system adjusts to soil conditions on its own."

Soil moisture monitors are composed of two elements: sensors that track the soil's water content and an electronic controller that can override the sprinkler system's watering schedule if the sensors indicate the soil is sufficiently damp. The sensors, which detect moisture by measuring how well the soil conducts electricity, are buried three or four inches underground to monitor the region where turfgrass roots are densest, he said.

The devices will have to overcome some skepticism to gain a foothold in the residential market, Mecham said. Some users have had bad experiences with soil moisture monitors, but he believes problems are often related to poorly planned or improperly maintained sprinkler systems.

"People who install one of these devices should understand it will take some time to fine-tune its performance," he said. "But we need to learn to trust this technology - we need better residential water management, and soil moisture monitors are a viable way to achieve that."

—UF/IFAS Press Release. July 21. 2005

Upcoming Events

Every Tuesday in September: ***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.

September 13, 2005: ***"Flower Gardening"*** . This Garden Center Educational Series will be presented from 9:00 am to 3:30 pm on Tuesday, September 13th at the Pensacola Garden Center located at 1850 North 9th Avenue, Pensacola. Register by phone at 484-9172 or 968-4416 before September 2.

September 15, 2005: ***Gulf Coast Gardening From the Ground UP: Vines for Northwest Florida.*** This free program is open to the public and will be presented at the Milton Library at 5541 Alabama Street, Milton, FL. Registration will open at 6:00 pm and the program will start at 6:30 pm. Len Schellhorn, Santa Rosa County Master Gardener, will be presenting a program on vegetables and herbs. Find out which plants are recommended for this area and learn how they will perform in your landscape.

Saturday, October 1, 2005: ***Harvest Happenings Fall Festival—Rhapsody of Trees.*** The Santa Rosa County Extension and Santa Rosa County Master Gardeners will host the 1st annual Harvest Happenings from 9:00 am to 4:00 pm. This day long event will include tours of the demonstration and teaching gardens, live characters to answer your gardening questions, arts and crafts, a food court, gardening educational programs and a tree adoption.

The Extension office is located at 6263 Dogwood Drive, Milton, FL. For more information call 623-3868.

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

Should Lawn Clippings Be Removed?

Occasionally someone will ask what is the best thing to do with grass clippings. The wisest use is to return them directly back onto the lawn, but not in amounts that will leave unsightly dead grass on top of the mown lawn.

When we can maintain the desired mowing height with regularly scheduled mowing, taking no more than one-third of the total leaf area off at any single mowing, these small clippings fall back into the turf canopy and actually benefit the lawn. As these clippings decompose they return nutrients back to the turf and feed beneficial microorganisms. It is when we don't, or can't, mow regularly that clippings become too long to fall back into the turf canopy and becomes "hay" on top of our lawns.

When clippings begin to pile up and block sunlight from reaching the growing turf, then they should be removed. Even when it is necessary to remove clippings from the lawn they should not be put in the trash as this will only fill our landfills much quicker and cost you money to haul them away. Lawn clippings after composting make great soil conditioners for flower and vegetable gardens.

A maintenance practice often overlooked in the mowing process is the proper care of the mower blade(s). If you haven't sharpened the bade at least once or twice this summer then you have neglected a simple but important step in keeping the mower performing at top efficiency and getting the best quality cut of the grass.

A dull mower blade essentially beats the top of the leaf blades off rather than making nice clean

Questions and Answers

Q: My Japanese magnolias always flower well in the spring and grow well until late summer. Beginning in August the leaves begin to turn brown. What could be causing this?

A: The Japanese magnolias, also known as Oriental magnolias or saucer magnolias are good early flowering plants, but the foliage generally starts to decline during mid-summer. The cause is believed to be excessive heat.

Saucer magnolias are adapted to the temperate zone, so summer conditions along the northern Gulf Coast are stressful. They usually flower and sprout new growth each spring even though they appeared sickly during the previous summer and fall.

Summer heat stress can be moderated by maintaining a two to three inch mulch on the soil surface beneath plants and by providing supplemental waterings during dry periods.

Q: Is it too late to prune blueberry bushes?

A: Major pruning of blueberry plants should not be done this late in the season. The ideal time to do any necessary pruning is as soon as possible after harvest.

Blueberry plants bear most heavily on the previous season's growth. Any pruning must therefore be done after the berries are picked, but early enough that new growth and flower bud formation can occur before winter.

Q: What is the procedure for curing gourds? I have grown some in my garden and would like to keep them for use later.

A: Allow the gourds to remain on the vine until they have reached maximum maturity and have begun to dry. Harvest by leaving a short length of vine attached and hang them below a hot ceiling where they will slowly dry out.

Q: Giant black grasshoppers have invaded my landscape and are eating the leaves of several shrubs and flowers. What kind of grasshoppers are they, and how can they be controlled?

A: The insect that you describe is the southern lubber grasshopper. Compared to most other species, it is huge. This large grasshopper is black when young, and becomes mottled with yellow as it matures.

Lubbers sometimes damage certain plants, especially daylilies. They can be controlled physically, by catching them. Squeamish gardeners, who don't prefer to handle such a large insect (they hiss by expelling air when handled), can use a spray. Contact your local Extension Office for current recommendations.

Q: I've noticed that hordes of caterpillars begin dining on azalea leaves this time of year. So far the azaleas keep coming back strong. Should I be concerned about these caterpillars? And, when should azaleas be pruned?

A: Azalea caterpillars, when everything is said and done, don't cause any long-term problem for azaleas. They can temporarily make plants look bad, though.

The best time to prune azaleas is as soon as the flowers begin to fade but don't prune after June or you'll interfere with flowering the following spring. Azaleas produce flower buds the previous late summer and fall. You can find the flower buds now tucked away in the leaves at the tip end of the shoots.

(Continued from page 4)

cuts. When this happens the leaf blade tips become shredded and split resulting in an overall ragged appearance to the lawn with brown, dried out tips on each leaf blade. It is not too late to get the blade sharpened and make your last few mowings crisp and clean with nice clean cuts on the leaf tips and in addition will help the mower engine run easier.

—by Dr. Wayne Wells is an Associate Extension Professor and Turfgrass Specialist.

Santa Rosa County Extension Service
6263 Dogwood Drive
Milton, FL. 32570-3500

Newsletter compiled by:

Theresa Friday
Extension Agent I
Environmental Horticulture
Phone: 850-623-3868
E-mail: theresaf@co.santa-rosa.fl.us
Website: http://www.santarosa.fl.gov/extension/horticulture/index.html

SANTA ROSA COUNTY EXTENSION SERVICE
6263 DOGWOOD DRIVE
MILTON, FL 32570-3500

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