

May in the Tallahassee Garden

by Katherine LaRosa

Sunday, May 5, 2002

May is a time to be vigilant in your watering and fertilizing practices and to be on the look-out for plant pests and diseases. Because of the warm weather, May is not the best time for planting garden and landscape plants. However, there are exceptions.

Planting: Plant elephant ears, caladium tubers, dahlias, crinum, and canna lilies. Plant zinnia and marigold seeds for summer flowers. Plant chrysanthemums for fall bloom. If you plant container-grown trees, shrubs and flowers, water frequently and mulch.

Lawn care: Seed, sprig or plug your lawn, if needed. If your centipede lawn shows signs of gradual decline, consider plugging it with St. Augustine grass which does well in sun or part shade. If no type of grass grows well in your shadier areas, try a ground cover such as ajuga, mondo grass, lirioppe, ivy or vinca.

Vegetable garden: Most vegetables should have been planted in March or April, but some can be planted now, including: sweet potatoes; pole beans; southern peas; butter beans; and okra. Water is especially important as vegetable fruits are maturing. Use a rain gauge and water your vegetable garden accordingly. For insect or disease problems in your garden, use the least toxic control possible. Hand removal of insects or affected plants may solve the problem. Or try insecticidal soap for soft insects, such as aphids, thrips and whiteflies. BT (*Bacillus thuringiensis*), a naturally occurring bacteria, can be used to control caterpillars. Always follow label directions.

Landscape plants: Pruning of spring flowering shrubs should be completed this month. Fertilize daylilies lightly as the buds appear. After blooming, remove the seed pods. Crape myrtle can be fertilized now. If gardenias show yellowing leaves with green veins, they may suffer from iron deficiency. Apply iron or iron sulfate, available from your garden center, to the soil. Follow directions carefully. Whiteflies may be a problem now. They primarily attack new growth on shrubs and some fruit trees. Sooty mold fungus grows in the honey-dew excreted by the immature stages of the whitefly. If whiteflies are a problem, spray with insecticidal soap according to label directions. Never spray when a large number of adult whiteflies are present. Instead, wait 10 to 12 days until most of the adult whiteflies have disappeared. This allows the eggs to hatch and the young to be killed by the spray before they can cause much damage.

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Ask a Master Gardener: Master Gardener Volunteers answer gardening questions week-days from 9:00 - 4:30 at the University of Florida IFAS Leon County Extension Office, (850) 487-3004.

Question of the Week: My fig tree had small fruit, but most of them dropped off. What is the problem?

Answer: Common fig varieties adapted to Florida such as 'Celeste', 'Brown Turkey' and 'Green Ischia' often shed fruit prior to maturity due to excessive heat or drought or heavy nematode infestation. If you suspect nematode infestation, which is more likely in sandy soils, mulch your fig with a 3-4 inch layer of mulch, from the trunk out beyond the branch spread. Or, root a few cuttings and plant in different locations. Heavy organic mulches lessen nematode damage. For more information, see The Fig, by T.E. Crocker, a University of Florida research publication at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/MG214>.

For more information about gardening in our area, visit the University of Florida IFAS Leon County Extension website at <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu>.

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