

June Gardening Tips

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Consistently hot weather arrives this month and, as a result, things start happening fast in the garden and landscape. Plant growth and development, as well as associated pests, seems to happen overnight. There is plenty to do outside during June.

Check the lawn weekly in order to head off insect pest problems. Spittlebugs have been active in centipedegrass lawns, and it is about the time that we see the first cases of chinch bugs infesting St. Augustine lawns.

Early planted flowering annual beds will need some maintenance in order to extend their flowering season. Remove weeds, fertilize again and prune away old flower heads and spikes.

The amount of summer color can be increased by establishing annuals and perennials that tolerate the hot, muggy weather to come. These include: celosia, coleus, crinums, crossandra, exacum, impatiens, kalanchoe, nicotiana, ornamental pepper, pentas, portulaca, salvia, torenia, vinca, zinnia, gaillardia, firespike and shrimp plant.

The vegetable garden will also need some attention. Remove weeds and sidedress plants by applying a fertilizer grade such as 15-0-15 to the soil just beyond the outside leaves. Use only 1 to 2 cupfuls of fertilizer per 100 feet of row and apply water promptly to activate the product and prevent burn.

There is still time to establish some of the more heat tolerant vegetables. Plant seeds of lima beans, okra and southern peas. Set out plants of eggplant, peppers and sweet potato.

Figs begin ripening later in the month. Some maintenance can help to ensure a bountiful harvest. Maintain a heavy mulch beneath trees and keep the soil moist. Protect the fruit from birds by covering trees with netting, or arise early each day in order to beat them to the ripening fruit.

Start a compost pile. Decomposition of the materials is rapid at this time of year because of our Gulf Coast heat, humidity and summer rains. There are many "recipes" from various sources. Major points when composting include using a variety of materials (leaves, clippings) of different particle sizes, adding a small amount of lime and nitrogen fertilizer and keeping the pile moist but not saturated.

Consider "soil solarization" during June and July. Using this technique it is possible to reduce the population of insects, diseases and weed seeds in areas that have been planted in vegetables and flowers year after year.

Soil solarization is limited to those areas that receive full sun and won't be planted again until next fall. First, pull up all old plant parts and rototill the area to a depth of 8 to 10 inches. Irrigate thoroughly and place a clear (not black) plastic sheet over the area and seal it to the

June Gardening Tips

ground with soil.

The clear plastic allows the heat to penetrate the soil, reaching temperatures that are lethal to some harmful organisms. After a few weeks, the soil can be treated deeper by removing the plastic, tilling again, watering and replacing the plastic.

This technique only works well during June and July because late summer rains occur so frequently that they keep the soil too cool. Don't try this using black plastic. Although it gets hot, it only transfers heat to the soil that it touches and doesn't allow the heat to penetrate like clear plastic does.

Question of the Week: My tomato plants have grown to a large size but don't have many fruits on them this year. Am I doing something wrong?

Answer: Tomato fruit set has generally been light this spring. The unusually cool nights that occurred during April and May are most likely the cause. Tomatoes do not pollinate well when night temperatures are below 68 degrees F. Though some pollination will occur during late May and June, I expect that we will have a shorter picking season this summer.

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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Return to [Monthly & Seasonal Articles](#).