

Construction Materials May Cause Sweet Spots in Landscape

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Most landscapes have a sweet spot or two, and unlike those found on baseball bats and golf clubs, these sweet spots are generally not desirable. Landscape sweet spots are often those areas where the grass, flowers, or shrubs turn yellow and decline even though adequate maintenance is being provided.

Such spots where plants struggle are often found near the foundation of houses with masonry exteriors, near concrete driveways, sidewalks, or where seashells have been used as mulch. These are areas where the soil is extremely alkaline or "sweet." In horticultural terms, the pH is sometimes above the acceptable range for normal plant growth.

The alkaline condition can usually be traced to high calcium-containing materials that were used during construction. Bits of mortar, when left on the soil around the house foundation, can constantly release calcium and keep the pH elevated indefinitely. Calcium also leaches from concrete and seashell drives and walks with the same result.

The effects of this soil condition are greatly magnified when acid loving plants such as azaleas, hollies, gardenias and centipede-grass are grown in such areas. These plants have great difficulty taking up iron and certain other trace minerals under alkaline soil conditions because the minerals are chemically bound.

In general, it is extremely difficult to permanently reduce the alkalinity in these areas simply by applying a chemical treatment such as a sulfur compound. The constant release of calcium from the various sized bits of calcium-containing debris rapidly raises the pH to its former level soon after each application.

Dealing with Sweet Spots

- Following construction, remove remaining mortar pieces, as well as debris from the edges of driveways and sidewalks. Consider skimming away the upper 2 inches of soil containing these fine particles and replacing it.
- Have the soil tested to determine if the pH is excessively high in the problem spots.
- If plants are already established and have begun to show nutrient deficiency symptoms, try applications of a chelated trace mineral product containing iron, sulfur, manganese, and other minor elements. These can be obtained in dry or liquid form. Follow label directions carefully.
- Use coarse organic mulches such as bark or pine needles. A two to three inch layer on the soil surface helps to slightly acidify the soil and moderate stressful conditions.
- As a last resort, replace plants with those species that better tolerate alkaline soil. Your County Extension office can provide a list of plants that are less sensitive to this condition.

Question of the Week: There is a large yellow-flowered shrub that I see growing in several

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yards in my neighborhood. It is blooming in September and has long formal looking spikes. What is this plant?

Answer: The plant that you have described is probably one of the Cassia shrubs. There are several species of these fall flowering plants. This is probably the species commonly known as candelabra plant. It can be found for sale at some nurseries and garden centers.

For more information on gardening in our area, visit the website for the University of Florida IFAS Extension in Leon County at <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu> or call (850) 487-3004

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