

Pretty Peppers Decorate Area Gardens

Marie Harrison

August 28, 2003

My saintly mother had little time for growing flowers and things to decorate the earth. She was too busy populating it with her children, and in the process she was much concerned about having enough food to feed them all. Consequently, her gardening time was spent in the vegetable patch caring for peas, corn, potatoes and all the other wonderful crops that the family grew for food.

However, after we all grew up and Mother realized that we were not going to starve to death, she began to grow a few things just because they were beautiful. One such plant was the ornamental pepper that Grandmother grew when my mother was a child. Mother saved seeds from these pretty peppers each year, and they were planted in flower beds around the house.

Each spring they bloomed tiny, inconspicuous flowers, but they were followed by peppers smaller in circumference than a dime. As they matured, they changed colors, starting out in shades of light green, then changing to lavender, orange, and red. I thought they were beautiful then, and my admiration of them has not diminished over the years.

They are, needless to say, always a part of my summer garden. These peppers reach a height of 10 to 20 inches and are grown as annuals. Actually, ornamental peppers are perennial, but they are killed by our winter temperatures. The colorful fruits are produced from May until frost.

They grow quite easily in full sun or partial shade, and they prefer moist soil amended with organic matter. I like them best planted in masses 12 to 18 inches apart where they make a solid mass of sturdy plants covered with colorful fruits.

If plants are left after frost, seeds will fall to the ground. If the soil is not heavily mulched, seedlings will spring up the following spring. If someone has shared seeds with you, spread them thinly over a prepared bed and pat them to insure contact with the soil. Do not cover the seeds, however, for they require light to germinate.

Volunteers are easily transplanted to other garden areas or potted up and grown in containers. Actually, they are one of our best bedding plants for hot weather, and they perform beautifully as a ground cover in mixed flower borders.

Many cultivars of ornamental peppers are on today's market. As a matter of fact, most peppers might be termed ornamental, but new lines, ranging from small Tabasco-types and miniature bells to large, banana-shaped peppers may be found that are attractive for ornamental use, culinary use, or both. They can be grown in the traditional vegetable garden, incorporated into landscape plantings, or used as showy container plants for porches and patios. All are very decorative and colorful, and they vary in their relative "hotness."

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Your Sago Palm May Have Manganese Deficiency

Larry Williams is Horticulture Agent for the University of Florida IFAS Extension in Okaloosa County.

For Thursday, August 14, 2003 Release

Tallahassee Democrat

There are certain essential plant nutrients that are naturally low in most Florida soils. One necessary nutrient that is often found in insufficient quantities in Florida soils is manganese.

Even though manganese is needed in very small quantities (referred to as a microelement, formally called minor or trace element), Florida's sandy soils are naturally very low in this nutrient. In addition, manganese is easily leached out of our porous sandy soil with rainfall and irrigation. This is yet one other reason why people that irrigate too often are not doing their lawns, landscapes, and gardens a favor.

The fact that this element is readily leached is compounded by improper soil pH. When the soil pH is below 5.5 (slightly acidic), manganese is more easily leached from the soil. On alkaline soils, with a pH above 6.5, manganese becomes fixed in a chemical complex that makes it unavailable to plants. This is one of the reasons why it is recommended to maintain a soil pH between 5.5 to 6.5 with most landscape and garden plants. Areas around building sites are very often deficient in manganese because the lime from mortar gets into the soil and raises the pH above the desirable level.

Correctly identifying the deficiency is half the battle. Often, the deficiency symptoms are mistaken for other problems. Unfortunately, a soil test alone can't be relied on as a means of determining the cause of a specific deficiency. This is because a soil test will show that a particular element is in the soil. But, it will not indicate that the element is in a form that your plants cannot use. So, in addition to a soil test, careful observations of the symptoms are a must in diagnosing the problem.

Any one or more of three principal symptoms may reveal a manganese deficiency. The first is chlorosis (yellowing) of the leaves, which may be interveinal (occurring only between leaf veins) or may cover the entire leaf. The second symptom is a noticeable reduction in the size of leaves, branches and fruit. The third is necrosis (dead tissue), which may occur in patches or over entire areas of a plant. In some cases, chlorosis and necrosis will both be observed on manganese deficient plants. But, you won't usually see all three symptoms together.

It's very common to see manganese deficiency in sago palms. In this case it is called frizzle top. This name is descriptive because the new growth begins to turn yellow, then brown and takes on frizzled appearance.

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You'll need to use manganese sulfate to correct the problem. Many times, a person will go into a garden supply store and ask for manganese sulfate and get magnesium sulfate, which is Epsom salt. It's interesting that magnesium is an essential plant nutrient as well, but using magnesium sulfate to correct a manganese deficiency will not work. Make sure to get manganese sulfate to correct a manganese deficiency.

The amount of manganese sulfate required will vary from one ounce, for very small plants, to five pounds, for very large trees. In addition, have your soil pH checked to see if it is in a desirable range. Visit the UF-IFAS Leon County Extension at 615 Paul Russell Road to pick up a soil test mailing kit.

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For more local garden information, visit the UF-IFAS Extension website for Leon County at <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu/>