May in the Tallahassee Garden

Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: Have fun by planting new and different flowers, such as this red powderpuff (Calliandra). Plant in full sun.

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“April showers bring May flowers” … but whether you actually received any April showers, or they passed you by, May will likely bring lots of watering chores. Typically one of our driest months, May also brings summer heat, causing stress to plants.

Most growing things need about an inch of water every week in order to thrive. If rainfall doesn’t give that amount, irrigation is needed. Adding a half inch of water weekly will be enough for most plants, until the rains return to give a good soaking.

Plants you set out this winter or spring will require more frequent watering. A very effective and efficient way to water them is with a micro-irrigation system which will put the water right at the plant roots. Overhead irrigation is the least efficient method of watering, as much is lost to evaporation. If watering container plants by hand, water all pots twice, as the first application prepares the soil to accept the water applied the second time around.

Lawns: Water lawns only when grass blades turn a bluish-gray color and fold in half. Water in the early morning, and place several rain gauges (or cans with straight sides) throughout the sprinkler pattern to determine when you’ve applied an average of one-half inch of water throughout the zone. This is a good time to plant plugs to fill in bare spots. But if you do, water frequently to get roots established.
**Flowering Trees and Shrubs:** Azalea pruning must be completed before early July, as later pruning would cut off next year’s flowers! Prune azaleas with hand pruners, rather than hedge shears – the former method retains a natural plant shape, while the latter results in green, artificial-looking “meatballs” of plants. Heavy pruning after mid-summer may also diminish camellia blooms the following spring. Gardenias may be pruned after they’ve finished blooming, and if the leaves are covered with black sooty mold, spray with either horticultural soap, or with an ultra-refined horticultural oil (not dormant oils, which can cause damage in hot weather). Some roses need regular sprays to control black spot and mildew. However, many old heirloom types and other landscape types such as ‘Knockout’ only need spraying if problems appear. Planting trees and shrubs now would require daily watering, gradually reducing frequency, until plants become established. You may want to wait until fall or winter when heat stress will be lower.

**Annuals and Perennials:** Many heat-loving flowers can be planted now, including zinnias, celosias, marigolds, vincas, annual or perennial salvias, red powderpuff (*Calliantra*), *Tecoma stans*, mandevilla, allamanda, and many others. Much of the fun of growing flowers is searching out unusual ones that you haven’t tried before. Annuals need to be fertilized monthly, and many need to be dead-headed (picking off spent flowers) to encourage continuous blooming.

**Bulbs:** Now that the soil is well warmed, many summer bulbs can be planted, including daylilies, caladium, crinum, gladiolus, iris, society garlic, and red-hot pokers (which come in a range of colors from reds to pinks to oranges). Most bulb flowers appreciate a light fertilization as buds appear. Overcrowded bulbs don’t bloom well; divide and transplant or share extras. Likewise, bulbs in too much shade don’t bloom well.

**Fruits:** Blueberries, figs and grapes should be watered deeply as fruit is forming, and well mulched to retain soil moisture and retard weeds. Citrus trees need well drained soil, and mulch is not recommended right against the trunk, but may be applied a foot away. Fertilize citrus this month.

**Vegetables and Herbs:** Watch for tomato horn worms, and pick off as seen. Uneven soil moisture may cause tomatoes to crack or split, or develop blossom end rot. If squash plants start to wilt, look at stems for squash vine borers and cut out the borer, or prune off affected parts. Plant southern peas, pole beans, eggplant, okra, butterbeans, sweet potatoes, melons, peanuts, acorn squash, pumpkins, and other heat-loving veggies and herbs. Plant basil, oregano, sage, dill, Mexican tarragon and other heat loving herbs.

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