May in the Tallahassee Garden

Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: Yellowbells (Tecoma stans) will flower summer through fall if in full sun.

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Right plant, right place
Winter annuals are feeling the heat! Replace them with heat-loving annuals like ‘Summer Wave’ torenias, narrow-leaf zinnias, and ornamental peppers. If you prefer perennials, consider yellow African bulbine (Bulbine frutescens), blue fanflower, yellow bells (Tecoma stans), orange crossandra, and gaillardia. Tropicals such as mandevilla, hibiscus, and allamanda are fast-growing and will provide great color through the fall. They may not overwinter here but are dramatic and well worth the yearly investment.

If you want to attract hummingbirds and butterflies, plant pentas, heliconia, firebush, shrimp plant, purple coneflower (Echinacea purpurea), verbena, and sage. All of these selections prefer a sunny location for best flowering.

Vegetables to plant in full sun this month are sweet potato, melons, okra, and salad tomato transplants. Also plant basil, cilantro, and fennel.

For shaded areas consider caladiums, coleus, begonias, impatiens, jacobinia, Persian shield, and Stromanthe sanguinea ‘Tricolor’.

If you have a low, wet area in your yard, think about installing a rain garden. Some plants which don’t mind wet feet are golden canna (Canna flaccida), giant coneflower (Rudbeckia maxima), inland sea oats (Chasmanthum latifolium), red Louisiana iris (Iris fulva) and Gulf muhly grass (Muhlenbergia capillaris).

Planting trees and shrubs is best done in winter when they are dormant. If you plant them now, you’ll be signing up for almost daily watering during dry weather.
**Fertilizer**

15-0-15 is the best general-purpose fertilizer for our area. Annuals and roses should be lightly fertilized each month during the growing season. Also fertilize herbs and vegetables monthly. If you did not fertilize your lawn in April you can still do it this month. Use a 15-0-15 fertilizer, with half of the nitrogen in slow-release form. Palms and citrus trees will also benefit from fertilizing this month. It’s best to use special palm and citrus fertilizers which contain the secondary nutrients needed by these plants. It is not necessary to fertilize established trees or ornamental shrubs unless they are showing signs of deficiencies.

**Water**

May is typically a dry month here, so it is important to provide supplemental water, especially to plants that are new to your yard. Once they are better established, after six months to a year, watering once per week is usually sufficient. Water your lawn only once per week if weather is dry, applying one half to three quarters of an inch of water. Watering deeply and less frequently encourages your lawn to develop deeper roots which makes it more drought-tolerant. This is an excellent time to calibrate your irrigation system.

**Mulch**

Pay special attention to mulching this month. It helps prevent weeds, keeps soil cooler and limits evaporation. Remember to pull mulch a few inches away from the bases of plants to prevent rotting.

**Maintenance**

Prune azaleas, gardenias, hydrangeas and other spring-blooming plants as soon as they have finished flowering. Pruning them later in the season removes next year’s flower buds.

With the arrival of warmer temperatures, insects are more plentiful and more active. Monitor your lawn and yard for signs of insects and disease and spot treat accordingly. It is not necessary to practice preventive insect and disease control.

Mow your lawn at the recommended height. This reduces stress and makes the lawn more tolerant to disease and insect problems and more drought-tolerant. Mow St. Augustine to a height of three to four inches and centipede one and a half to two inches.
Recycle

Pine needles and leaves are free, make great mulch and compost, and are earth-friendly. Branches and limbs in a brush pile provide shelter from predators for birds and other wildlife. My goal is to keep everything from my yard in my yard, rather than sending it to the landfill.

Wildlife

The hummers are back! If you don’t already have one, try a hummingbird feeder. They’re inexpensive and so is a homemade solution of one half cup of sugar to two cups of water. Just heat the mixture for two to three minutes in the microwave, stir until clear and allow cooling before using. Be sure to change the food often, at least once per week. Butterflies and house finches are also frequent visitors to hummingbird feeders.

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