

August in the Tallahassee Garden



Photo by David Marshall - Vinca

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Thursday, August 1, 2011
Tallahassee Democrat

Prolonged high heat and humidity can really stress gardens and gardeners during the hot summer months. Now is the time to complete your outdoor chores in the early morning, and as my grandmother used to say, “don’t dilly-dally”. A rain storm can provide a day or two of relief, and the morning following a rain is a great time to pull weeds.

Chamberbitter, the weed with a row of seed pods beneath each leaf, seems very prevalent this year. When you pull chamberbitter from the ground, don’t shake the soil from the roots; this spreads seeds. Also, please do not put chamberbitter in a compost pile, as the seeds may survive and be reintroduced to your garden/lawn when you use the compost to amend your soil.

Lawns: Following good cultural practices is the best way to prevent problems. Monitor for diseases and pests, and treat early if there’s a problem. Mow at the right height, three to four inches for St. Augustine grass and one and a half to two inches for centipede. Mow frequently, so that you remove no more than one third of the grass blade. Keep mower blades sharpened, and leave grass clippings on the lawn to recycle nutrients. Established centipede lawns usually need no more than one fertilization a year, in April. But if your St. Augustinegrass lawn hasn't been fertilized since spring and it's not looking that great, you may fertilize late this month with a 15-0-15 fertilizer with seven and a half percent slow-release nitrogen. Use no more than three to six pounds per thousand square feet, and apply it with a cyclone or rotary type lawn fertilizer spreader.

Try not to overwater this month. Automatic sprinklers can be turned off during rainy times and manually set for those periods that we receive no rain.

Vegetables: During the first week or two of August, clean up the garden patch. Remove weeds to the compost pile, but do not add diseased plant material such as tomato plants that died. Add mature compost to the vegetable garden in preparation for late summer planting of peppers or a “challenge crop” of tomatoes. If you do plant tomatoes, select varieties that will set fruit at warmer summer temperatures. Plant them deeper than usual and mulch them well with leaves or hay. In the third and fourth weeks of August you can begin planting mustards, snap beans, and southern peas. In late August and September plant broccoli, collards and turnips.

Herbs: You can sow herb seeds like chives, parsley, cilantro, sage, thyme and dill late in the month.

Flowers: Deadheading (removing spent blooms) will result in more flowers. Sun loving cosmos, zinnia, Mexican sunflower and cleome seeds may be sown now. This is not an ideal time to put in new plants; however, pentas, melampodium, torenia, salvia, lantana, rudbeckia, or purple coneflowers in a sunny area will provide color and attract both hummingbirds and butterflies. Cut back perennials such as salvias and swamp sunflower by about one third to encourage another flush of blooms. Add two to four inches of mulch around your plants to keep the soil cooler and help maintain moisture as well as inhibit weed growth. Water frequently until the plants become established. Micro-irrigation systems are environmentally friendly and help us to not waste water. The UF-IFAS Leon County Extension Center on Paul Russell Road has micro-irrigation systems, and you are welcomed to come by and see them. The Master Gardener volunteers will be happy to show you how they work.

Shrubs and Trees: Fertilize young trees and shrubs which have been in the ground fewer than three years, with a slow release 15-0-15 fertilizer. Check the thickness of the mulch (two to four inches is ideal) and leave a space between the mulch and the trunk of the shrub or tree. Mulch that lies against the trunk can create an environment for problems with disease and rot. Leave a six inch circle right around the trunk with no mulch.

Bulbs, Corms, Rhizomes and Tubers: Plant red spider lily, oxblood lily, spider lilies, and autumn crocus. Plant zephyr lilies; they will bloom next spring and summer. Pick the location carefully because they don't like to be replanted from place to place. Crowded iris plants should be divided now. Cut the leaf blades into a small fan shape; and reset the divided clumps in a sunny, well-drained location. Plant the rhizomes no deeper than one inch. Transplanting now gives the plants time to establish new roots before winter. Late in the month you can begin dividing daylilies, amaryllis, crinum and agapanthus if they need it.

Does anyone else remember “wishing for warm weather” during our record low temperatures this winter? One hundred and five degrees in Tallahassee is a record that I hope will not be repeated. Again, this reminds me of another of my grandmother’s sayings: “As a rule, man’s a fool; when it’s hot, he wants it cool. When it’s cool, he wants it hot; always wanting what is not.”

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