Tomorrow is the first day of spring and what comes with spring? Spring-cleaning. Don't just spring clean the inside of your home. Remember to do the outside, too. If your landscape has been neglected through the winter months, like mine, it may be in desperate need of a spring-cleaning. Spring-cleaning duties in the landscape should include pruning, weeding, mulching, and fertilizing.

With pruning, the main purpose is to control the size and shape of plants. When plants grow out of that desired shape or height, they need to be pruned. Plants that bloom during the summer such as hibiscus, allamanda, oleander, roses, bottlebrush, and princess flower can be trimmed now. By pruning just before the spring growth, it will create fuller branches and promote more summer bloom. Even just trimming the tips of the twigs will promote more shoots and flower buds on the plants.

Removing dead, damaged, and diseased branches should be the first step in pruning shrubs. The next step is to remove any branches that may touch each other, cross over each other, or just look out of place. If the shrub is still too large after removing these branches, cut back the older branches before younger ones, if possible. When cutting branches, make the cut at a bud or lateral branch. This will create a neater looking shrub that does not have the appearance of just being pruned. It will also help to prevent disease from entering the shrub.

After the pruning is completed, now it is time to get those pesky weeds out of the landscape. A weed is defined as any plant that is growing in a place that can include valued landscape plants. If they propagate in an area where you did not intend them to grow, they are weeds. To control weeds, we can use a variety of cultural, mechanical, and chemical methods.

The use of cultural landscape practices to control weeds in a planting bed, among shrubs, and around trees, includes the use of mulch. Mulch provides many benefits to plants, one of which is helping to prevent the growth of weeds. Use 3-4 inches of mulch around plants, shrubs, and trees. Less than 3 inches of mulch will not be as beneficial in preventing weeds. Mulch, from an organic source, also adds valuable nutrients to the soil and aesthetic value to the landscape.

Mechanical control of weeds means pulling them out of the ground manually. This can be a time consuming method, but in some situations it is necessary. Around tender plants, chemicals should not be used to control the weeds because they could also harm the plants. Therefore, the weeds would have to be pulled out by hand. Chemicals (herbicides) can be used around hardier, woody plants, when careful not to touch anything green with the chemical.

If plants show signs of a nutrient disorder (yellowing leaves) or you want to encourage plant growth, this is the time to apply a fertilizer to the plant beds. A complete fertilizer labeled for ornamental trees and shrubs is best for most plants. A complete fertilizer means that all three major elements - nitrogen, phosphorous, and potassium - are available in that fertilizer in some proportion. It is also recommended that a fertilizer containing other elements such as iron, manganese, sulfur, etc. be applied once a year. These nutrients are listed on the label as secondary and/or minor plant nutrients. For a "long lasting" fertilization select a fertilizer containing some percent or slow-release nitrogen, sometimes listed as "Water Insoluble Nitrogen".

When applying fertilizer to the plant beds, always apply the amount recommended on the fertilizer bag label. Too much fertilizer can harm the plants, by "burning" them and applying too little fertilizer will not provide the desired results. With a good spring-cleaning, pruning, weeding, mulching, and fertilizing, your landscape will be tip-top shape for the spring.
Termite Infested Mulch? Just a rumor.

You may have heard this rumor through a friend or email - Mulch from hurricane-affected areas is infested with Formosan termites. Dr. Faith Oi, Assistant Extension Scientist, University of Florida/IFAS has commented on this rumor. She states, "There have been many rumors swirling about the Internet concerning termites being spread throughout the country by large chain stores via bags of landscape mulch. In my opinion, the greater risk to structures is from termites already established in your yard as opposed to any termite stragglers that may be brought in on bags of mulch. Termites can be found in mulch, but their survival is poor and here's why: The ability of the termites to survive the chipping process to create mulch is not good; additionally, once separated from the colony, their ability to survive further decreases. Finally, even when termites are found in mulch, mulch-fed termites suffer significantly lower survivorship."

"In terms of spreading invasive species like the Formosan subterranean termite, the greater problem is associated with the transport of large chunks of wood containing enough termites to sustain reproductive forms. For example, infested railroad ties used in landscape or salvaged timbers from razed structures are known to be associated with the spread of the Formosan subterranean termite."

For more information on the topics mentioned today, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners at (321) 697-3000. They are available to take calls Mondays thru Fridays from 10am to 2pm.

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