

Spring Cleaning in the Landscape

Jennifer Pelham, Urban Horticulture Agent
University of Florida/IFAS Extension in Osceola County

Spring is here! And what comes with spring? Spring cleaning. Don't just spring clean the inside of your home. Remember 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, such as pine bark, pine straw, or melaleuca, should be used. Mulch 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. If your plants look healthy and are performing to your expectation, fertilizer may not be needed at all.

With a good spring-cleaning, pruning, weeding, mulching, and fertilizing, your landscape will be tip-top shape for the spring. For more information on gardening or landscaping and for answers to your plant questions, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners at 321-697-3000. Their free plant clinic is open Monday thru Friday from 9am to 3pm. You may also stop by. They are located in Osceola Heritage Park at the Extension Services building.