Though spring doesn't officially arrive until next month, I am happy for the warm sunny weather. Warm weather triggers some drastic changes in the landscape. Some trees leaf out while others drop their leaves. Elms, sweet gum, river birch, sycamore, cypress and pecans are deciduous trees that lose their leaves in the fall with the onset of cool weather. Soon they will jump into spring with bright new leaves.

Red maples are beginning to show red winged seeds and will soon form the red new growth that gives them their name.

Azaleas are showing color in the landscape. Huge formosa types are located throughout the older sections of town. You will notice the pink, lavender and white flowers that are most popular. They are a great addition to shady landscapes but have a tough time in the sun during these dry conditions. Shade grown plants are more drought tolerant. Mine are in bright indirect light under oaks and have been watered about 5 times since they were established 15 years ago.

Camellias still provide color on shiny green shrubs. Select early and midseason selections for the best growth in our area.

Amaryllis lilies are producing bloom spikes from glossy strap leaves. Flowers of apple blossom pink, coral and various combinations of red and white appear soon. These easy to grow bulbs can be planted in pots or in the yard. Plant them in groups for the best color display. Once the blossoms fade, cut off the old flower stem. Leaves continue to form attractive green clumps through the fall when foliage thins and the plants take a rest for winter.

Dogwoods, redbuds and tabebuias are spring flowering trees. Dogwoods do best in the shade as they are understory trees. They are commonly used in full sun but require a thick layer of mulch and adequate moisture, especially during our dry season while they are in bloom. Only the white dogwoods grow well in our mild climate.

Redbuds produce purple flowers on leafless stems. They are like dogwoods in their growing requirements.

Pink and yellow trumpet flowers produce spectacular color on leafless tabebuia trees. As the flowers age, they fall and create a carpet of petals under the tree. They are cold sensitive but I have seen some beautiful specimen trees in recent years growing in full sun. You may have noticed one in a yard across from the Beaumont government services building in downtown Kissimmee.

Citrus blossoms will soon fill the air with their fragrance. Trees produce many flowers and set more fruit than the tree can possibly support so expect small pea sized fruit to drop during the late spring growth. Maintain adequate soil moisture for maximum fruit load, but avoid over watering which wastes water and promotes root rot disease and death.

Cold damaged shrubs such as Ruellia, Cuphea (false heather), hibiscus, powderpuff and others are beginning to show signs of life. Cut out dead and damaged stems to just above the ground and new shoots will revive the drab landscape colors of winter.

Pitiful looking 'Aztec' border grass, lily turf, canna lilies and gingers can be cut back now to remove brown, dry leaves. Cutting the plants several inches above the ground is a lot easier than hand pulling or trimming individual leaves that have dried during the winter months. New leaves emerge from the roots.

Spring trimming rejuvenates pampas grass. Be cautious of the saw tooth leaf edges. Cut the old stems so that the ones in the center of the clump are 8" to 12" and taller than the ones at the edge. You will have a
cone shape mound of dead stems that are soon covered by new leaves.

Oaks begin shedding their leaves now. Yes, in Florida, live oaks, laurel oaks and water oaks wait until spring to defoliate briefly before bursting into spring green.

Locals rely on cypress trees and pecans to tell us when spring is over and danger of frost is past. It is normally a safe bet. Cypress trees, our deciduous conifer, is one of the last trees to leaf out in the spring. Pecans are also slow to start new leaf growth.

Enjoy the wonders and colors of spring as your garden is transformed.

The new 10 day Osceola County Fair opens at the Agricultural Center this week, on Wednesday, February 15. Call 407-846-6046 for fair information. When you come, be sure to bring your plant samples and problems for identification to the Master Gardener information booth in the Exhibit building. Master Gardeners have a variety of free fact sheets on many aspects of landscape care. They also have many colorful University of Florida home gardening references on hand for a modest donation to support Master Gardener educational programs. Tour the demonstration vegetable garden and landscape and chat over the garden gate with experienced gardeners in the Demonstration Gardens in front of the Red Barn where many of the 4-H and FFA youth exhibits are on display. See you at the fair!

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