JANUARY - MARCH, 2000

Written and edited by

ELEANOR C. FOERSTE
HORTICULTURE AGENT

ROSE M. TABBERT
MASTER GARDENER

LATE WINTER PRUNING
NEW INSECT REPELLENT
LANDSCAPE FIRE REDUCTION
ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY
POINSETTIAS
ASPARAGUS
COLD PROTECTION
PINEAPPLE
LAWN FERTILIZATION
LATE WINTER PRUNING

Late winter and early spring are the time to prune many shrubs and small trees. Summer and fall blooming shrubs generally develop flowers on the current season's growth and should be pruned before the first flush of spring growth. Shrubs that bloom in spring or winter should be pruned immediately after flowering. Pruning is practiced to maintain plant health, control growth, and to encourage flowering and fruiting.

Pruning should encourage plant health, not disease. It's important to prune properly using the correct tools. For general cleanup hand shears are used, loppers on branches up to ½", a pruning saw for larger branches and hedge shears to trim closely clipped hedges. Tools should be kept sharp. They not only cut easier but will not bruise plant tissue. Bruising causes slower healing and increases the probability of disease.

A clean cut should be made. The cut should have a smooth surface, not one that looks as if the tissue has been torn or pulled. Care should be taken not to injure the plant around the cut, nor rip or tear the bark above or below the cut. The cambium layer just below the bark is important to wound healing and is easily harmed. Don't twist or turn the shears as you cut, this will injure the plant as well as the shears.

Painting the wound has become a controversial practice and is not generally recommended. The old standard recommendation had been to paint all wounds over 1 inch in diameter with a quality dressing to protect the cut surface from wood rott ing organisms and radial cracking upon drying. Research has shown that on exposure to the sun, the coating often cracks, and moisture enters accumulating in pockets that may occur between the wood and the coating. This situation is even more inviting to wood rott ing organisms than one with no covering.

Unless the shrub is a topiary, espalier, or part of a formal hedge it shouldn't be closely clipped but allowed to develop into a naturalistic form. It doesn't mean it should be left alone. Pruning is done to enhance its natural beauty. Step one is to remove dead, diseased, or injured branches. Once this is done it may be necessary to thin out the plant. Remove branches that cross to keep them from becoming entangled. If it still looks too thick remove some of the older branches.

Clipped hedges (topiary and espalier) require a specialized type of pruning and may become a continuous job during the growing season. There are two factors to remember about clipped hedges: it should be clipped soon after the new leaves have reached mature size and should be trimmed so that the base is wider than the top so the light can reach the lower leaves.

Remove branches that are different from the rest. Cut long growth back to a bud that is 4" to 6" below the average branch length. To reduce the overall size, cut back branches 4" to 6", cutting each separately. This will provide a neat, informal shrub that retains its natural shape. SOURCE: Florida Master Gardener News, Vol.12, Issue 1.

FACT: Dollarweed usually signals overwatering. Help your lawn strangle dollarweed by watering only when the grass wilts.
NEW INSECT REPELLENT

University of Florida entomologist, Jerry Butler, has developed an insect repellent made from geraniol, a naturally occurring oil derived from lemongrass and other plants. He says it’s an alternative to DEET. It repels biting insects and ticks and is safer to use than DEET, which has been blamed for toxicity problems in children and some adults. Patented by the University of Florida, the formula is licensed to Naturale Ltd. and marketed under the registered trademarks MosquitoSafe, TickSafe and FireAntSafe. Source: University of Fl., Dept. of Environmental Horticulture.

LANDSCAPE FIRE REDUCTION

by JOYCE SALG, MASTER GARDENER

The widespread wild fires of last year are of concern to almost everyone. Here are some tips that may help reduce the threat to private property should wild fires occur again.

Create a 30' space between the house and flammable landscape material. Remove excessive growth and undergrowth and clear vegetation from under decks. Remove dead limbs and branches from plantings and remove branches to 15' from the chimney. Cover chimney. Clean house gutters. Stack wood piles 30' from buildings. Use turf in danger areas. Mow and irrigate regularly.

Plant heat resistant plants. Space trees properly (consider mature size) and remove crowded trees. Maintain palm trees (remove skirts, etc.). Clear saw palmettos close to the house and in adjacent property. Clean adjacent wooded areas and don't dump yard waste in vacant lots. Use concrete drives, walks and stone for mulch. Set gas tanks well away from structures. Consider a cistern or water supply (2500 gallons) if no hydrant is nearby. Make sure house address is visible from the road. Don't rely on roof sprinklers: if electricity is off the pumps won't run.

Prescribed burns have to be tolerated. This allows old, dry plant material to be reduced, thereby reducing the incidence of wildfire.

Some fire resistant plants are: succulents, sabal palm (if properly trimmed) and some fruits. Native plants are NOT usually fire resistant.

ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY YARDS

by JOYCE SALG, MASTER GARDENER

Florida Yards & Neighborhoods, backed by the University of Florida, is a program which stresses conservation and ecology in the landscape, thereby saving money and personal energy. By following the basic principles, waterways will become purer. We all depend on clean water, as do our friends downstream.

Start by having a landscape plan. Group plants that have the same growing needs. Lay out a watering system which irrigates sections according to its need. Use mulch for weed control and reduce the need for additional water. Recycle grass clippings and leaves. Fertilize only to maintain the landscape. Know the insects in the landscape; treat only for those that cause damage. Provide
cover, natural food and water for wildlife. Be aware of where rain runoff is going. The storm sewer is the last resort. Maintain waterfront property to reduce pollution to lakes, ponds and rivers.

The Florida Yards & Neighborhoods handbook is full of tips on landscaping. Ask for a copy at the Osceola Agriculture Center (next to the rodeo arena). When you think your yard measures up, a team of Master Gardeners will inspect the property. If it accumulates the minimum of 36 points, we'll certify your "Florida Yard" and reward you for your efforts.

The Osceola County Master Gardeners and Florida Yards & Neighborhoods committee will be happy to answer questions, provide solutions to problems, and guide you toward your Florida Yard. Information is just a call away-- (321) 697-3000 --and most of it is FREE!

POINSETTIAS

Christmas poinsettias can give added enjoyment in the landscape if cared for properly. Many new varieties will retain their leaves and decorative bracts far into the New Year. Eventually the lower leaves will begin to drop and the bracts will start to fade. At this point, the plant should be placed in a cool, dry location. Give only enough water to keep the soil from drying entirely so the stem doesn't wither.

After the danger of frost has passed, plant outdoors in the warmer parts of central and southern Florida. The poinsettia is sensitive to cold and in many years the plants are frozen before they have a chance to bloom.

Choose a sunny, well-drained location protected from north winds and frost and in an area where plants will not receive any light at night. Poinsettias must have almost total darkness at night before flower buds are formed. They are prevented from blooming when exposed to light from the home or street lamps. Even a brief exposure to artificial light will prevent or markedly delay flowering.

In order to keep plants bushy and compact, pinch the top ½" from new shoots when they reach a length of 4" to 5". The pinched branches will develop more shoots. When these grow to 4" or 5", pinch again. Repeat the process as necessary. Don't pinch after the 1st week of September; this will delay or prevent flowering at Christmas.

Apply 1 to 2 tablespoons of fertilizer such as 6-6-6 or 8-8-8 about 1 month after planting. Three applications per year are recommended; the first when spring growth starts, the second in June and the last in late fall after the bracts have set color. The last application promotes large bracts and aids in promoting root growth during the winter. A fourth application may be needed in mid-summer if extremely heavy rains follow the early summer application. Water well each week during dry weather. SOURCE: Florida Master Gardener News, Vol. 12, Issue 1.

ASPARAGUS

Asparagus is a perennial, cool season crop that produces from March to June. It is a tall grower with many light branching stems. A long narrow strip at the back of a lot is worth planting with asparagus even if ordinary vegetable gardening doesn't appeal to you.
It pays to buy crowns for planting as growing from seed is a slow proposition. Gardeners trying asparagus, as many have with varied success, should set out one or two year old crowns. They are best because they suffer less in transplanting than older field grown crowns. Avoid crowns that are wilted, moldy, or that have few roots. Plants will not reach full maturity for three years. Once established they will go on producing up to 15 years or more (but not in Florida).

Good asparagus spear production is dependent upon a dormant period. Dormancy is usually brought about by cold weather or drought, and since Florida has neither, growth is more or less continuous resulting in weak spindly spears. Asparagus beds in north and central Florida often yield good quality spears for 4 to 5 years before regressing.

Asparagus thrive in deep, loose, fertile soil prepared two weeks prior to planting. Roughly 200 square feet is needed for a bed containing 2 rows 20' long set about 4' to 6' apart. This space will accommodate between 30 to 40 plants, which is sufficient to supply a family of 4. Dig trenches 1' wide, 20' long, and 8" to 10". Work 3" to 6" of processed manure into about 6" of soil in the bottom of the trench; soak thoroughly. Set the crowns in the bottom of the trench so that the tops are 6" and 8" below the top of the trench with roots spread out evenly. Space about 12" apart and cover with 2" of loose, soil. Water slowly and deeply.

As the plants grow, fill the trench a little at a time, but don't cover the tips. By summer the trench will be completely filled. Water thoroughly every 7 to 10 days during the summer.

Because asparagus need at least 2 years to get established, spears should not be harvested the first year. Allow them to make foliage. When the foliage turns brown in late fall or early winter, cut the stems to the ground. Never cut foliage back too soon; it manufactures food for the roots for about 6 months following harvest period.

In early March of the second year, the first asparagus crop is ready to harvest. Cut spears for only 4 to 6 weeks, then allow foliage to develop. From the third year on, harvest the crop for the full 6 to 8 week harvest period or until the spears become thin indicating that food stored in the roots is about exhausted for the season.

Spears are ready to cut when about 6" to 8" long. Cut the spear at ground level. To avoid injury to the crowns or to new shoots developing below the ground, use an asparagus knife specially designed for the purpose. At the start of the cutting season, some spears can be cut every 3 days. As the weather warms, spears appear more rapidly and may be harvested once or twice a day.

In cold winter areas, mulch with well rotted manure before the first frost to protect the root system. Early each spring, cultivate and feed with a complete fertilizer. Source: Vegetable Gardening, A Sunset Book.

COLD PROTECTION

Since the effects of El Nino have passed the weather experts are predicting colder than usual temperatures. Temperatures in Central Florida are sometimes low enough, especially in January and February, to cause cold damage to plants. Sudden temperature drops result in increased damage as the plants have not had time to adjust. Wind will also increase damage as will calm, clear nights.

Some circumstances lead to "confused" plants which are more easily damaged. "Confused" plants are tropical (warm weather) plants grown in sub-tropical (cold weather) areas; acclimatized (cold adjusted) plants that have been exposed to unusually warm weather resulting in spring time
growth which is easily damaged by unexpected cold, and recently fertilized or pruned plants. Potted plants are also more sensitive since their roots are not protected or insulated by surrounding warmer soil.

To prevent freeze damage choose plants known to tolerate cold. Avoid low areas because they develop colder temperatures. Avoid poorly drained areas because the plants develop weak, shallow roots which are more susceptible to cold injury. Proper and timely nutrition will produce healthy plants that will be able to withstand cold damage and will recover faster.

A natural tree canopy can reduce cold damage by reducing heat loss from the ground. Plants under the canopy will benefit. Windbreaks also offer some protection. Well watered soil will absorb more solar heat than dry soil and will release this heat later; however, prolonged saturation will damage root systems. Mulches will reduce soil heat loss and protect the root system.

Covering will protect foliage by reducing heat loss. Covers may be made of cloth or plastic. Frames should be built to keep covers from touching the plants. Plastic should be removed during the day to allow trapped heat to escape. The covers should reach the ground to be effective. Anchor with clumps of soil or rocks to hold covers in place.

After the freeze, check soil moisture to determine when to water as the plants do lose water through the leaves. Wait until spring growth begins before pruning any dead or damaged foliage. Cut back into healthy green stems. This insures the wound will heal over and reduce chances of disease.

---

**THE PINEAPPLE**

The pineapple originated in Brazil and Paraguay and can be grown in all tropical and subtropical areas of the world.

In the tropics, fruit is produced almost continuously throughout the year and ripens 12 to 18 months after planting. In Florida production is greatest during the summer months. Fruit should ripen on the plant for maximum flavor and sugar content.

Pineapples grow and produce best where temperature is warm and relatively uniform throughout the year. In Florida they will survive a 28° temperature, but sustain leaf damage, and are killed at lower temperatures. Prolonged exposure to temperatures in the low 40's result in internal breakdown or "heart rot" of the flesh. Extremely high temperatures will cause sunburning and cracking of the fruit. The climate in Florida isn't suited for large scale commercial production of the pineapple.

While Florida's sandy soil is satisfactory, pineapples thrive best in a sandy loam of medium fertility. They tolerate drought well, but adequate moisture is necessary for good fruit production.

Varieties are: Red Spanish, with a pale yellow flesh and spiny leaves; Smooth Cayenne, pale yellow to yellow flesh, high in sugar and acid content, no spines on leaves; Natal queen, golden-yellow flesh, crisp texture and delicate mild flavor and spiny leaves; Pernambuco (Eleuthera), pale yellow to white flesh, sweet, leaves spiny; and Abakka, yellow flesh, sweet and tender.

Propagation is by planting new vegetative growth from the mother plant. There are 4 general types: "slips" which arise from the stalk below the fruit, "suckers" which originate at the axils of
leaves, "crowns" which grow from the top of the fruit, and "ratoons" which come out from underground portions of the stems. "Slips" and "suckers" are the preferred planting material.

Pineapples are planted preferably in summer, in beds of two to 5 rows with walks between them. Place each plant 10" to 18" apart depending on the vigor and size of the variety.

In Florida, fertilizer applications containing 7-2-7-3 or 8-3-8-4 (N-P-K-Mg.), with 40% of the nitrogen coming from slow release sources can be used at a rate of 1oz. per plant 4 months after summer planting.

Nematodes and mealybugs are pest problems for the pineapple. Mealybugs are usually introduced with infested planting material. Preventative measures should be taken by dipping "seed" material in a malathion-water solution or diazinon-water solution. For small amounts, mix 2 teaspoons of malathion or 1 teaspoon of diazinon per gallon of water. Check plants frequently and if control measures are needed apply a spray containing either malathion or diazinon at the same rate used for dipping. Do not apply either pesticide within 7 days of harvest. Be sure the product is labeled for use on fruit crops. Always read and follow label directions.

To avoid nematodes problems use nematode free planting material. Crowns or slips should never have been planted in soil. Since there are no fumigants for homeowners to use to treat the soil "soil solarization" should be done before planting. Source: HS 07

---

**LAWN FERTILIZATION**

Central Florida lawns of all types should be fertilized in March. Use a complete fertilizer such as 16-4-8, 10-10-10 or 6-6-6. The complete fertilizer supplies nitrogen, phosphorus and potash. Nitrogen is the nutrient most used by the grass and often is the material that burns the lawn if applied at excessive rates. Read labels carefully before fertilizing. If in doubt, stop in or call the agriculture center at (321) 697-3000 and ask for the bulletin *Establishing Your Florida Lawn*.

---

NOTE: To simplify information in this publication, trade names of products may have been used. No endorsements of these products is intended nor criticism implied of similar products.