

# PREPARING YOUR LAWN AND GARDEN FOR THE FLORIDA SUMMER

Whether you are a full time Florida resident, a summertime traveler or you head for your summer home, your Florida garden is in peak season. Rainy, hot, humid weather speeds growth. 40 inches of rain, 95 degree highs and 100% humidity encourages not only wanted?? ornamentals, turfgrasses and beneficial insects, but unwanted weeds and destructive pests as well.

There are two ways to manage your landscape during this time.

1. Hire an outside contractor for landscape maintenance and/or pest control services. Some landscape companies provide fertilization and pest control services. If yours does not, you may want to hire a specialized company that does. Check the company's credentials and be sure they are certified in Best Management Practices for Charlotte County and have a Commercial Pesticide License. Also, keep in mind John Bradley's Lot Care suggestions as written in *Accents*: "We strongly recommend that you do not pay contractors in advance for your lot care. They should be paid only after the work is completed. There have been many instances of contractors only caring for your lot just before you return in the fall rather than doing the work all summer as you assumed the work would be done."

Be sure your house-sitter is aware of any contractors you are expecting so they can provide feedback.

2. Manage the care yourself either during the summer or before you leave. If this is your choice, you need to know what you are doing.

## Turf (Lawns)

There are four main types of turfgrass in SW Florida.

1. St. Augustinegrass (Florata)
2. Bahiagrass
3. Zoysiagrass
4. Bermudagrass

Each grass has its positive and negative aspects.

1. St. Augustinegrass is thick-bladed, thick-rooted and spreads easily by under and over-ground rhizomes and stolons. It forms a thick, dense mat when properly cared for. It is the most popular lawn grass in this area. Unfortunately, it is home to chinch bugs and white grubs. Chinchbugs are tiny (about 1/4") black bugs that live in the thatch layer and suck the sap out of the plant making it look droughty. They spread rapidly from plant to plant. Chinch bugs are the major insect problem we have in the park. Grubs are insect larvae that live about feed on turfgrass roots. Plant parasitic nematodes can infest St. Augustine lawns as well. Damage symptoms include thin density, a weakened root system, slow recovery and certain weeds such as prostrate spurge and Florida pusley. Large patch and gray leaf spot are two major disease problems of St. Augustinegrass. Both diseases can be controlled with fungicides.
2. Bahiagrass is open-canopied field grass such as you see in some of our common areas. Mole crickets are the major insect problem here. Mole crickets burrow beneath the soil, leaving small mounds similar to mole mounds. They feed on grass roots.

3. Zoysiagrass is a finer bladed grass than St. Augustinegrass and makes an attractive lawn. But, it is extremely affected by large patch disease. At one time, we replaced the St. Augustinegrass at the country club with zoysiagrass but we couldn't eliminate a yearly outbreak of large patch so we replaced that with St. Augustinegrass again. Its major insect pest is hunting billbug. Zoysiagrass also likes to be mowed at a lower height than St. Augustinegrass and our mowers are set for St. Aug height.
4. Bermudagrass is the turfgrass we have on the golf course and lawn bowling green. It is not a good lawn grass because of its high maintenance. Many of our homeowner lawns contain common bermudagrass which has an open canopy and leggy growth habit. Bermudagrass is a happy home for mole crickets, its number one insect pest, and numerous diseases.

## **Weed controls**

Be sure you know which grass type you have before purchasing a weed control product be it weed and feed or not. Weed controls for bahia or bermudagrass will generally kill St. Aug and Zoysia and the opposite is also true. Again, follow the label exactly or you may kill your lawn.

Moles will burrow under any type of turfgrass looking for insect snacks. The best way to get rid of them is to control the insect population of your lawn.

The park provides semi-annual fire ant bait treatments each April and October. We have seen less activity throughout the park since we started treatments about five years ago, so it seems to be working.

## **Ornamentals**

Many insects and diseases love the ornamental plantings throughout the park. Research the varying species so you know which are beneficial and which are destructive. Aphids, scale, mites, mealybugs, white flies are just a few of the destructive insects found in SW Florida. There are too many to name here.

Lichen is the gray-green tissue papery growth on the trunk and stems of a plant. It is not a health issue. Spanish moss is also not a health issue.

There are products available, both organic and chemical, that control plant insects and diseases. Read and Follow Label Directions Exactly. More is not better, it's too much. The label is the law. See attachment.

## **Palms**

In Maple Leaf, we have a large variety of palm species. Sable or cabbage palms are the most common and are native to Florida. It is the Florida State Tree. We also have Queens, pineapple or Canary Island Date palms, Sylvestres, Cuban Royals, Pygmy Dates, Foxtails, Christmas, Bismarkias, Cats and Paurottis.

The major issue that we handle with palms is Ganoderma Butt Rot. It is a fungus that infects the base of palms and outward signs are conks (large mushrooms) growths at the base of the palm and dying fronds. The trunk may be cracked and split as well. There is no cure and we have to remove the palm to help prevent infection of nearby palms. It affects older Queen palms but it can infect others. Homeowners are responsible for their own trees. As a courtesy, the park will pay for removal of dead or diseased trees which the park has planted, but not homeowner planted trees. We have been removing about 30 palms per year due to this disease. Ganoderma fungus

stays in the soil. It is recommended that you don't plant another palm in the same spot for at least 5 years.

Plant parasitic nematodes can infest any lawn or garden. Nematodes are microscopic worms that feed on the water and nutrients in plant cells. Damage symptoms include thin density, a weakened root system, slow recovery and certain weeds such as prostrate spurge and Florida pusley.

### **Invasive species**

Carrotwood, poison ivy, Brazilian pepper, balsam apple, rubber trees, ficus and Virginia creeper are all examples of invasive species that should be removed before they create a problem. All will out of control and crowd out desirable species. Poison ivy and Brazilian pepper can cause allergic reactions on contact. Rubber tree and ficus roots will damage foundations, driveways, and patios. They will also clog and crack irrigation and sewer lines in their quest for water.

### **Fertilizers**

A variety of fertilizers are available, both organic and not, for every gardening need. Once again, know your target plant and follow label directions exactly. Some fertilizers recommend watering in, some you apply to damp foliage and some to dry soil. So read the label!

#### **CHARLOTTE COUNTY FERTILIZER ORDINANCE:**

No fertilizer containing nitrogen or phosphorus may be applied from June 1 to September 30 to turf or landscape plants.

There is a limit of no more than 4 pounds of actual nitrogen per 1,000 square feet per year total. Phosphorus applications shall not exceed 0.25 pounds per 1,000 square feet at each application and shall not exceed a total of 0.5 pounds per 1,000 sq. ft. per year.

Nitrogen fertilizer must contain at least 50% slow-release nitrogen. Calculate your fertilizer needs so that you apply 1 pound N per 1,000 sq. ft. per application.

If fertilizing within 3-10 feet from a water body or wetland, a deflector shield must be used on all broadcast spreaders. Fertilizer may not be applied within 3 feet of the water body or wetland.

No grass clippings, vegetative material or vegetative debris may be deposited in stormwater drains, ditches, conveyances, water bodies or roadways.

Fertilizer may not be applied within 10 feet of any water body or wetland (3 feet if a deflector shield is used). No fertilizer may be applied to impervious (non-porous) surfaces, and any spillage must be removed.

All applicators of fertilizer (except homeowners on the own property) must receive training and certification in a Charlotte County-approved Best Management Practices (BMP) training program.

Whichever lot care route you are taking, you need to:

A. Understand the County Fertilizer Ordinance and

B. Educate yourself so you can recognize weed and insect species that are common to this area.

This will help protect you against unscrupulous contractors and/or provide you with the knowledge to treat your own lawn and garden properly.

To sum up, for optimum health, plants need proper care...

1. Food (fertilizer)
2. Parasite control (insecticide)
3. Disease control (fungicide)
4. Weed control (herbicide)

Respectfully,  
Nancy Miller, CGCS