



Monthly Newsletter

April 2012

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Published by Norma Samuel
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**Timely Gardening Tips for
MARION COUNTY**

by David Y. Goodman,
UF/IFAS Marion County
Master Gardener, In-Training

Back when I lived in Tennessee, I loved the spring. Things were coming alive. We had plenty of rain and amazing, amazing green everywhere. Here, things are coming alive... then dying of thirst as the brutal sun bakes our sand into desert and desiccates their newly awakened roots.

Well – perhaps it’s not quite that bad – but last year I did spend an inordinate amount of time dragging my hose from new fruit tree to fruit tree and from garden bed to garden bed. As soon as I finished watering everything, it was time to start again. On the up side, there were no more frosts! Hurray for frost-free growing! And, unlike Tennessee and other northerly climes, we’re not subject to long, cold, drizzly brown winters.

Keep an eye on your grass throughout April. Hopefully, you fed it in March, but if not, it’s not too late. Adequate fertilization

A Tale of Tails

by Kathleen Patterson, FYN Program Coordinator

Mother Nature can be quite cruel at times. She controls the seasons making them short or long, cold or hot and as we can note of late—wet or dry. With the lack of rainfall comes a new set of worries. The carpet of Bahia grass that I call my lawn has become “The Sahara Desert of the South”. Of course I must admit that it never was a carpet of grass but rather an assortment of grasses and weeds that used to be green.

Grass is labor intensive. To keep it looking good requires time and money as well as our greatest natural resource—water. It has always been my belief that Mother Nature will provide and she does but not always to our liking. And so the story begins.

Gardening may be the number one hobby for many of us but as I look around I see that all gardens are not equal. My love for gardening came from my Grammy and my Dad. We visited my grandmother weekly as we were growing up and I have never forgotten the beautiful lilacs in her yard. Bushes that seemed to thrive on the dishwasher she gave them rather than sending it down the drain.

My Dad had a beautiful garden of vegetables; many of which never made it to the table—instead they were eaten out in the garden fresh off the vine. Of course my sisters and I never enjoyed the weeding that was designated as our chores during the growing season. Still, I don’t enjoy weeding but I love my gardens. The green thumb must be inherited—we all have followed in my dad’s footsteps and become avid gardeners. Thanks Dad!

Moving here to Summerfield almost twenty-five years ago has brought about many changes in my landscape. The biggest change on the property was the reduction of turf area. An acre of turf in my book is just too much. Mowing, fertilizing, watering and controlling insects with pesticides were more than I wanted to do. We chose Bahia grass for our turf for several reasons. It is very drought tolerant and seems to require fewer chemicals for insects and disease. We elected not to have an irrigation system installed.

My beginning flowerbeds were by trial and error. Little remains of my first attempts at gardening here in Central Florida. Plants I expected to thrive seemed to shrivel up and die. Giant sunflowers I expected never reached more than three feet in height. The squirrels ate the tulip bulbs and the Wisteria almost outgrew the back yard. But the mistakes I made initially actually allowed me to evaluate and recalculate as well as educate and so fewer mistakes are made.



Timely Gardening Tips for MARION COUNTY

by David Y. Goodman,
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will help reduce drought stress. Also, make sure you give the lawn a good soak every week this month if the skies don't do it for you. Your young trees and shrubs will also need extra attention. Make sure to chop back the grass around your young trees in a 3-4' ring. If you don't, the competition for water will greatly inhibit your tree's growth. Grass is remarkably stingy with letting nutrients and moisture through to the tree roots beneath.

And speaking of trees, have you ever seen a tree called "Hercules' club?" Also known as *Zanthoxylum clava-herculis*, this strange creation looks like an invention of Dr. Seuss. A Florida native, Hercules' club can be found growing at the edges of woods in half-shade. Its trunk is covered with strangely spaced thorns and most of the greenery appears in a big puff like the feathers at the end of a feather duster. I'm going to plant a few beneath my oaks this year just because I like things that look weirder than I do.

Along with the warmth, the bugs are back. Keep your eyes open and provide habitat for predators. Planned "wilderness" patches, stick and rock piles, dense foliage and water features are all great places for bug-eating good guys to live.

April is blueberry season. If you don't have any of your own, be sure to look around for a local U-Pick establishment or hit the farmer's market. You'll be surprised at the good price you can get when you buy in quantity, and by buying locally you're supporting other Florida farmers and gardeners.

Enjoy the weather – and plant away!

A Tale of Tails

by Kathleen Patterson, FYN Program Coordinator
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Summer here begins in spring and lasts well into fall. With the extended growing season we can enjoy our garden treasure twice as long as we did up north. It wasn't hard to see that the longer season allowed for many more flowering plants and then to the realization that the flowering plants increased the butterfly population. I then decided to encourage the butterflies and became an avid butterfly gardener.

So began my quest for nectar plants for the butterflies but also host plants that are necessary for the larval stage or the caterpillar to consume before the cycle begins again. For every new flowerbed I have tried to incorporate both types of plants helping to keep the butterflies in my landscape. Several of the beds have flowering shrubs, perennials, a small number of annuals and herbs scattered throughout. Herbs such as dill and fennel are also host plants for several of the caterpillars but they also encourage beneficial insects into your landscape and they in turn will help control the insects that cause damage.

As the butterfly population increased so did the good insect population. It was then that I convinced my husband that we would not be using pesticides unless absolutely necessary. He argued that if we didn't use chemicals we would be over run with enormous sized insects and they would overtake our property. Our conversion to no pesticide use was over 18 years ago and I am happy to report that the insect population is well controlled and have not overtaken the property.

Routine inspection of my landscape plants will show an abundance of beneficial insects that call my garden home. Ladybugs are busy controlling the aphids, assassin bugs are busy at work and the dragonflies that arrived when we installed the pond are consuming vast quantities of mosquitoes and other unsavory insects. All is well or is it? Several things are beginning to occur, some of which are causing me a bit of distress.

It appears that my caterpillars are disappearing at alarming rates. The beneficial insects are also decreasing in population. How can this be? What is happening in my gardens? Where are these creatures going? I have noticed a pair of cattle egrets that are spending plenty of time sitting on the fences that are covered with passion vines. This vine is the host plant for the Gulf Fritillary caterpillars of which I seem to have none. It would appear (I would never assume) that the egrets are enjoying these delectable creatures for breakfast, lunch and even dinner. I can get Franklin to chase squirrels with no problem but he seems to be blind to the egrets.

Next are the birdhouses that provide nesting areas for the bluebirds, titmice, and other small birds. The snag in my side yard has several new cavities that were excavated by the local woodpeckers with at least one containing new baby birds. The golden dewdrop was home to several newly hatched mockingbirds. But the biggest surprise of all is the pair of Great Crested Flycatchers that took up residence in one of the Bluebird houses and raised a brood of baby flycatchers.

It took several days to identify this bird and after a bit of research I was surprised to find that this bird is a year round resident and I had never seen one before. Why this year? Perhaps it is due to loss of habitat or is it? Perhaps the real reason is the abundance of delicious insects in my landscape. We watched these flycatchers hunt together bringing back large dragonflies and even an occasional grasshopper. I believe even the assassin bugs are being assassinated!

A Tale of Tails

by Kathleen Patterson, FYN Program Coordinator
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My bugs are disappearing at alarming rates! Most of the birds that are nesting in my yard are insect eating birds. Several are making routine stops at the feeders and gathering seed or suet and supplementing the baby bird's diet with other food sources. But the bottom line is this-the birds are gorging themselves on the very insects that I want to keep yet I also want to encourage the birds so what am I to do? I think I need to let Mother Nature have her way while I look the other way. Sooner or later balance will return to my landscape and meanwhile the birds need to eat too. Remember, never fool with Mother Nature.



Bothered by Caterpillars?

by Norma Samuel, Urban Horticulture Agent



A few days ago my youngest child said to me "Mommy I don't like going to school anymore". Upon investigating to see why the sudden dislike for school she told me that there are too many caterpillars crawling around. Can you believe my child doesn't like bugs?

These are tussock moth caterpillars (*Orgyia* species) and they occasionally occur in large numbers this time of year in Marion County. Besides the annoying presence of numerous hairy caterpillars, these insects may spin their difficult-to-remove cocoons on houses, boats, picnic tables and other outdoor articles. Feeding by the caterpillars usually has little impact on oak trees, their preferred hosts, but wind-blown caterpillars may land on and defoliate small trees and shrubs around the yard. The caterpillars feed for about 4-6 weeks and the adults emerge mid April to early May.

Orgyia detrita is the most common of the three species that occur in Florida. Caterpillars of this species generally are dark bodied with a red head, two black "hair pencils" projecting forward like antennae, four dense tufts of hair (tussocks) on the back, and a fluffy tuft projecting to the rear like a tail. Unique to this species are the orange-colored spots along the back and sides. Caterpillars of the white-marked tussock moth, *Orgyia leucostigma*, are similar looking but are distinguished by their lighter body color and yellow spots. The rarely-encountered third species, *Orgyia definita*, has a yellow or tan head to go with its pale body, hair pencils and tussocks.

Management Recommendations: Persons disturbed by tussock moth caterpillars may wish to do some of the following:

- Apply an insecticide to the foliage of the host trees before the caterpillars mature and begin dispersing. Only shrubbery threatened by the heavy feeding of immature wind-blown larvae would warrant a pesticide application.
- Walk around the house with a broom and sweep the climbing caterpillars into a pail of soapy water before they have a chance to spin their cocoons.



Items below are available for purchase at the UF/IFAS Marion County Extension Service. Please come to see these environmentally-friendly products.

MICRO-IRRIGATION:

- Eco-friendly
- Plants love it
- Saves time & money

Eco-Friendly **MULCH**
AVAILABLE HERE...

Cost-Saving, Eco-Friendly **Rain Barrels**
FOR SALE!

Got Questions?

What does 4-H have to offer my child? When is the best time to prune crepe myrtles? How can I make money off 10 acres of land? What is the difference between type 1 and type 2 diabetes?

uf/ifas marion county **EXTENSION SERVICE**

We Have Answers

UPCOMING LECTURES/EVENTS:

Educational seminars and events are presented by UF/IFAS Extension Agents and or Master Gardeners.

“Ask Your Master Gardener”

Growing Fruit in Florida:
fruit trees for our climate

April 7, 2:00 pm

Main Library

Please pre-register by April 4

“Ask the Experts”

The Horticulture Agent and a group of Master Gardener’s will be on hand to answer gardening questions. Attendees are encouraged to bring any samples/pictures to the session.

April 17, 2:00 pm

Dunnellon Library

Please pre-register by April 13

Must Have Plants for Every Marion County Gardener & Garden Tour

Drought, tolerant, native and Florida-Friendly plants that thrive in Marion County

April 20, 9:30 am—noon

Marion County Extension Service

Please pre-register by April 13



Bothered by Caterpillars?

by Norma Samuel, Urban Horticulture Agent
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- Remove cocoons by slipping tweezers or a similar instrument between the cocoon and the wall. Wear a long-sleeved shirt while doing this, as the caterpillar hairs in the cocoon may irritate the skin on the forearm.

For more information and colored photos of these caterpillars visit

<http://entnemdept.ufl.edu/foltz/eny3541/Tussock/Orgyia.htm>



Bromeliads

by Anne Lambrecht Master Gardener

The 3000 species of the Bromeliad family includes members such as Spanish moss (neither Spanish nor a moss) and the pineapple. Other members resemble aloes or yuccas while still others look like green leafy grasses. Bromeliads are considered “Neotropical” which means they are only found in the New World tropics with most of them coming from South America, especially Brazil. They are so unusual and so pretty.

Bromeliads are inexpensive, easy to grow, require very little care and have long lasting blooms and ornamental foliage. They come in a wide range of sizes. They do not like the cold. They can be found in a wide variety of habitats from hot, dry deserts to moist rainforests to cool mountainous regions.

Bromeliads have only in the past 100 years become accessible ornamental plants. They could be found in royal botanical gardens or the greenhouses of wealthy Europeans.

Columbus was intrigued by the pineapple and brought them back to Spain from his second voyage to the New World in 1493. It had been cultivated for centuries by the Carib Indians in the West Indies. To the explorers they looked like a pinecone and tasted (they thought) sweet like an apple.

The pineapple is the only member of the family cultivated for food. Many bromeliads contain a protein-digesting enzyme, bromelain, used as a meat tenderizer. Fresh pineapple contains bromelain so it cannot be used in gelatin molds because the enzyme would break down the congealing proteins (but canned is fine). The Husband will gag if I even mention a gelatinous or congealed salad. When I am gardening and get scratched by the edge of a bromeliad, my skin forms welts until the next day. I think this is the enzyme at work.

Bromeliads grow three ways:

1. Terrestrial – these bromeliads rely on their roots for water and nutrient absorption.
2. Saxicolous – grow on rocks with roots going into cracks seeking moisture.
3. Epiphytic – grow on other plants, trees, shrubs or cactus for support and take moisture and nutrition from the air, hence their name, “Air Plants”.

Bromeliads

by Anne Lambrecht Master Gardener
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All Bromeliads are composed of a spiral arrangement of leaves sometimes called a "rosette". The bases of the leaves in the rosette may overlap tightly to form a water reservoir. This central cup also collects leaf debris and insects. These are called tank bromeliads and are usually epiphytic. In some species, the bases of the leaves form small chambers as they overlap and these protected spaces are often home to ants. In exchange for shelter, the ants' waste may provide the bromeliad with extra fertilizer.

All Bromeliads also share a common characteristic: they have tiny scales on their leaves called trichomes which serve as a very efficient absorption system. In the desert, these scales help the plant to reduce water loss and shield the plant from sun burn. On some, the scales appear silvery white and feel fuzzy. Sometimes the scales form patterns on the leaves that add to the plant's beauty.

The flower is usually produced in the center of the rosette. The stalk, or scape, may be long with the flowers held far away from the plant or the scape may be short with the flowers nestled in the rosette. The scape may produce a single flower or many individual flowers and may have colorful leaf-like appendages that serve to attract pollinators. Bromeliads will only flower a single time. Once the (mother) plant stops producing leaves and produces its flower, it will not start making leaves again. However, the mother will produce new plantlets called "offsets" or "pups" and these will feed off the mother plant until they are large enough to set roots of their own and survive as a separate plant. I know a bromeliad grower who actually kills the mother with a screwdriver in order to hurry the pups along. It is a sight you just cannot watch. The green leafy top of a pineapple is called the 'crown' and may be removed and planted to start a new plant.

My favorites? Dancing Lady, Matchstick, Fingernail. But you can't get the unusual ones just anywhere. Contact the Bromeliad Society of Central Florida: <http://mybscf.org/> for specific sales (usually in the summer).

Can you imagine a living wreath made of epiphytic bromeliads? How cool.

The above borrowed from Bromeliad Society International, www.bsi.org



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FLORIDA
IFAS Extension

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