TIPS AND TASKS

Spring blooming bulbs should be fertilized just as the new growth emerges. Abnormally warm winter temperatures have resulted in many spring bulbs, such as daffodils and snowdrops, emerging and blooming early this year. If your bulbs have already flowered, wait until November to fertilize with a complete fertilizer such as 10-10-10. Summer flowering bulbs can be fertilized when the shoots emerge.

Fertilize trees and shrubs before active growth begins (before mid-March). Fertilize based on your soil test for best results. For more information about fertilizing trees and shrubs, stop by the office and pick up a copy of “A Gardener’s Guide to Fertilizing Trees and Shrubs”. Fertilize perennials and annuals in April. Do not fertilize warm season grasses yet. Wait until May or June for best results.

If necessary, continue application of preemergent herbicides to centipede and St Augustine lawns through early March. Avoid applications of once turf starts to green up. Bring weed samples to the plant clinic for specific herbicide recommendations. While you are here, request a lawn maintenance calendar for your turf type.

March is an excellent time to relocate plants or transplant container grown plants. Fall blooming perennials can be divided now. (Divide spring blooming perennials in the fall.) Keep an eye on new plants and replanted divisions throughout the spring and summer and provide adequate water to make sure they establish well.

Many cool season spring vegetable crops can be planted now. Early March is a good time to transplant broccoli, cauliflower and cabbage plants. Asparagus beds should be established by the end of March. Kohlrabi, lettuce, mustard, radish, turnips, and spinach can be started from seed through the beginning of April. Potatoes can be planted until the beginning of May.

Remember to wait until after the last frost to plant warm season crops like tomatoes, cucumbers, squash and peppers. The last average frost date in Onslow county is around April 21. However, this is just an average – in any given year the last frost may be earlier or later. Be prepared to protect these
crops from frost if necessary. Heat-loving crops like okra, eggplant, sweet potato and watermelons will do better if you wait an extra couple of weeks for the soil and air temperatures to warm.

**GROWING BLUEBERRIES**

Blueberries are a delicious, healthy summer treat. Not only are they tasty, but blueberries have the highest antioxidant content of any fresh fruit. Even better, blueberries are relatively easy to grow and can be very productive producing two to four gallons of berries per bush per year once they are established. If that’s not enough, blueberry bushes are attractive shrubs that can be incorporated into your landscape to add beauty along with tasty fruit. Blueberry bushes bear delicate white flowers in the spring, followed by beautiful blue fruit in the summer. The foliage turns red and orange in the fall before dropping to expose red-tinted winter stems. Before planting your blueberry bushes, consider the following:

There are two types of blueberries grown in our area – southern highbush and rabbiteye blueberries. Of the two, the native rabbiteye is generally easier for homeowners to grow. The rabbiteye varieties tend to be more tolerant to drought, heat and variation in soil pH than the southern highbush varieties (which are grown at many commercial blueberry farms). Rabbiteye blueberries bloom a little later than southern highbush varieties so they are less likely to be damaged by a late spring frost. Rabbiteye blueberries grow into large bushes – up to 6 to 8 feet tall and wide. Unpruned bushes can grow even larger.

When purchasing rabbiteye blueberries, make sure you purchase at least two different varieties, preferably three. Rabbiteye blueberries rely on having another variety to provide adequate cross-pollination and ensure good fruit set. Varieties are divided into early, mid and late season categories. Selecting varieties from each category will extend your harvest season. Early season varieties including ‘Climax’ and ‘Premier’ will ripen in mid-June. These selections will be followed by midseason varieties such as ‘Tifblue’, ‘Ira’ and ‘Yadkin’. Late season varieties like ‘Centurion’ and ‘Powderblue’ finish out the season from July through early August.

Pay special attention to site selection and preparation to ensure a successful blueberry patch. Blueberries will be most productive in full sun but rabbiteyes will produce a reasonable crop in partial shade as long as they receive at least four hours of direct sunlight per day. Blueberries require well-drained, acidic soils with lots of organic matter.

Identify a well-drained sight with adequate sun then collect a soil sample. (Submit your sample to your local extension office. In Onslow County, call the office at 910.455.5873 or stop by 4024 Richlands Highway for sampling information.) This free service will provide you with information about your soil’s pH and nutrient profile. Blueberries prefer an acidic soil with a pH between 4.0 and 5.5. If the pH of the planting site is higher than 5.5, you can lower your soil pH by working sulfur into the soil. If the pH is over 7.0, you probably should not try to grow blueberries in that location. Contact your local extension office to discuss your soil sample report and determine how much sulfur you need to add. If sulfur is necessary, it should ideally be applied 3-4 months before planting and tilled in.

Blueberries thrive in high organic matter soils. Sandy soils that are amended with compost and organic matter are ideal for growing blueberries. Incorporate 3-4 inches of organic matter over the bed and work it in to a depth of 6 to 8 inches. Peat moss or well-decayed pine sawdust or bark are good choices for sandy sites. In heavier soils or sites with poor drainage, compost and pine bark soil conditioner can be added and the planting bed can be shaped into a raised bed to improve drainage.

After planting, blueberries should be kept well-watered, especially during the first few years when they are getting established. A soaker hose is convenient and will give more uniform wetting than handwatering. An organic mulch of bark, woodchips, sawdust or pinestraw will help retain soil moisture and prevent weeds. Apply a 3 to 4 inch layer to the top of the bed after planting.

For more information about growing blueberries in North Carolina, stop by the office and request a copy of “Growing Blueberries in the Home Garden”.

FRAGRANT SHRUBS FOR ALL SEASONS
Danny Lauderdale, Extension Agent, Pitt County

Evergreen plants provide fill and great backdrops for interesting foliage and flower colors. Variegated foliage often brightens up dark areas of the garden. Nothing provides greater delight in the garden, however, than wonderful fragrance from flowers or foliage. Try to fit a few plants into your landscape that will brighten your day through fragrance.

Fragrance, according to Webster’s Dictionary, is an agreeable sweet odor. No garden is complete without it. It is even better if you select plants to provide fragrance for each season of the year. Here are a few fragrant winners that are hardy throughout North Carolina. Use these or other fragrant plants to enhance your enjoyment of the garden.

Butterfly bush (Buddleja davidii) is a deciduous shrub available in slow- and fast-growing forms that reach up to 10 to 15 feet high and just as wide. Its deciduous leaves are often gray underneath. Lavender, white, yellow, purple and pink flowers grace the garden with their butterfly-attracting fragrance from June to September. Full sun and well-drained to moist soil provide the best growth.

Sweet shrub (Calycanthus floridus) is a traditional southern landscape plant that grows naturally from Virginia to Florida. This 6- to 9-foot-high by 6- to 12-foot-wide shrub is deciduous and grows best in partial shade and deep moist soils. Its green leaves are often shiny with a quilted appearance due to vein patterns. Reddish-brown or maroon flowers with a fruity fragrance are prevalent in April and May. Purchase sweet shrub in flower to be sure it’s fragrant.

Small anise-tree (Illicium parviflorum) is an evergreen shrub with olive-green leaves that are held upright on a plant that grows 8 to 12 feet high and just as wide. It is tolerant of sun or shade and moist or dry soil. The plant blooms in May and June with small yellow-green flowers hidden by the foliage. The flowers are not fragrant, but the leaves of this tough screening plant smell like licorice. Star-shaped fruit become noticeable in the fall.

Perhaps the toughest deciduous fragrant shrub is winter honeysuckle (Lonicera fragrantissima). The plant grows 10 to 15 feet high and as wide in sun to partial shade and moist to well-drained soil. Creamy-white lemon-scented flowers grace this shrub from January through March.

Tea olive (Osmanthus heterophyllus) is an evergreen shrub that looks like a holly and grows 12 to 15 feet high and 12 to 15 feet wide. Small white flowers have a long-distance fragrance that will get your nose’s attention from across the yard during September to November. It grows best in light shade and moist, well-drained soil.

REDUCE WATER USE
Make Your Landscape Water Wise
Charlotte Glen, Horticulture Agent

Water wise landscapes are designed and maintained to need less water year around, making them more resilient to dry weather and less reliant on irrigation. These are both desirable qualities in our area, considering droughts often occur and the increasing demand for water caused by rapid development. Applying water wise principles to your yard will help you reduce your outdoor water use and grow a healthy landscape. Making your water wise landscape does not require you to redo your entire yard; simply incorporate the following practices into your landscape design and maintenance activities.

Group Plants by Their Water Needs
Plants vary greatly in the amount of water they need to grow well. Some are adapted to withstand long periods of low soil moisture. These include junipers, yaupons, Chinese hollies, Indian hawthorn, lantana, yucca, and muhly grass. Other plants, like azaleas, roses, dogwoods, impatiens, and Japanese maples, need more constant soil moisture to grow well. Grouping plants together in beds based on their water requirements makes watering much more efficient and practical, and is the foundation of water wise landscaping. Take a look at your landscape beds after several days without rain or irrigation. Are some plants thriving while others are wilting? Replace wilt prone species with harder, more drought tolerant varieties. This does not mean your entire yard has to consist of
drought tolerant varieties. If there are plants you want to grow that require more water, group them together in a location that is convenient to water, but try to keep these high water use plantings to a minimum.

**Water Well**
Make sure your plants get the water you give them. Apply water slowly, at a rate it can soak into the soil, otherwise it will runoff into the storm water drain. Prevent water loss due to evaporation by avoiding watering methods that spray water into the air. Soaker hoses or drip irrigation systems apply water at the root zone, where plants need it. If you must water using overhead sprinklers, avoid doing it in midday when water loss due to evaporation will be at its highest. When you do water, apply enough to wet most of the root zone. This will encourage plants to grow deeper, more drought resistant root systems. For lawns, one half an inch of water at each watering is adequate, while most landscape plants need around one inch in a single application to soak their root zones. The frequency you need to water will depend on your soil type, the plants you have, and the weather. A good guideline is to allow plants to show slight symptoms of drought stress such as slight wilting between watering. To help NC residents water their lawns more efficiently, NCSU has recently launched a free online irrigation decision aid tool, available at [http://www2.turffiles.ncsu.edu/tims](http://www2.turffiles.ncsu.edu/tims)

**Conserve Water with Mulch**
Applying mulch on top of any soil will help it hold water longer. There are many types of mulch to choose from, such as pine straw, pine bark, and shredded hardwood, but the most important thing is to put them down at the proper depth. Trees and shrubs should be mulched two to three inches deep to keep the soil cool, prevent weed seed from germinating, and preserve soil moisture, while annuals and perennials only require one to two inches of mulch. Never pile mulch around the base or trunk of trees and shrubs as this can damage or even kill woody plants. Also, do not use plastic under mulch. It prevents water from entering or exiting the soil, does not allow decaying mulch to enrich the soil, and rarely provides any weed suppression benefits.

**Learn More!**
These are only a few of the many things you can do to make your landscape healthier and reduce outdoor water use. To learn more about water wise landscaping and drought tolerant plants for our area, stop by the office and request a copy of ‘Water Wise Landscaping’.

**DROUGHT TOLERANT PLANTS FOR ONSLOW COUNTY**
We have a wide selection of drought tolerant plants that grow well in our area. Below are some suggestions. These lists certainly are not exhaustive, but they will give you some ideas to start.

Annuals provide a shot of color throughout the growing season. Many annuals require a lot of water to look their best but these drought tolerant summer annuals will reduce your watering needs: asparagus fern, Madagascar periwinkle (*Catharanthus roseus*), Mexican heather, globe amaranth (*Gomphrena globosa*), melampodium (*Melampodium paludosum*), red fountain grass (*Pennisetum setaceum ‘Rubrum’*), moss rose, purslane, Texas Sage (*Salvia coccinea*), mealycup sage (*Salvia farinacea*), marigold, and creeping zinnia.

Herbaceous perennials offer low maintenance color, year after year. These perennials will be drought tolerant once they are well established but provide them with adequate water through the first growing season. There are plenty of perennial options for sunny locations including: yarrow, Arkansas blue star (*Amsonia hubrichtii*), ‘Powis Castle’ artemesia, butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), heath aster (*Aster ericoides*), false wild indigo (*Baptisia spp*), threadleaf coreopsis , hardy ice plant, dianthus, blanketflower (*Gaillardia pulchella*), guara, Mexican firebush (*Hamelia patens*), daylily, red false aloe (*Hesperaloe parviflora*), lantana, Turk’s cap (*Malvaviscus drummondii*), Russian sage, thrift (*Phlox subulata*), autumn sage (*Salvia greggi, S. microphylla*, hybrids), Mexican bush sage (*Salvia leucantha*), stonecrops, and hen and chicks. For shady locations, consider: cast iron plant, Robb’s spurge (*Euphorbia robbiae*), or sacred lily (*Rohdea japonica*).
Woody trees and shrubs form the backbone of a garden design. Like the herbaceous perennials listed above, these plants will be drought tolerant once they are established: many species of juniper and holly, abelia, winter jasmine, nandina, pittosporum, barberry, spirea, bottlebrush (Callistemon rigidus), Mediterranean fan palm, pineapple guava, leatherleaf mahonia, pyracantha, and rosemary.

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UPCOMING CLASSES

Container Gardening
Don’t let lack of space or poor soil spoil your gardening season this year. In this class you will learn how to grow flowers, vegetables and herbs in containers. This class will be offered at three different times and locations:

• Jacksonville Public Library, Saturday, March 17 at 10 am
• Richlands Public Library, Saturday, March 17 at 1 pm
• Harriotte B. Smith Library aboard Camp Lejeune, Wednesday, March 21 at 1 pm (call 910.451.3026 to register for this session)

Insects in the Garden
Learn the good, the bad and the ugly about insects in the garden. We will learn how to recognize common garden insects, promote beneficial insects in the garden and safely control pests. This class will be offered at three different times and locations:

• Harriotte B. Smith Library aboard Camp Lejeune, Thursday, April 19 at 1 pm (call 910.451.3026 to register for this session)
• Jacksonville Public Library, Saturday, April 21 at 10 am
• Richlands Public Library, Saturday, April 21 at 1 pm

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UPCOMING EVENTS

Onslow County Farmers Market opens for the season on April 14 with fresh local strawberries, cabbages, broccoli, cauliflowers, leeks, kohlrabi, tomatoes, and lettuce along with local meats, eggs, cheese, and baked goodies. The Saturday and Tuesday Farmers Markets are held at 4024 Richlands Highway, behind the County Multipurpose Complex. The Thursday Farmers Market is held on Western Boulevard behind Dick’s Sporting Goods. For more information about dates and times, visit the market website at onslowncfarmersmarket.com. Follow the Onslow County Farmers Market on Facebook for weekly produce updates and special event information.

The Onslow County Master Gardeners will hold their spring plant sale at the Farmers Market on Saturday April 14, 21 and 28. The Master Gardeners will have a selection of tomato and pepper seedlings including many disease resistant varieties. They will also have herbs and perennial plants for sale.

The Master Gardener Plant Clinic will open April 10. The clinic is open weekdays from 9-12 and 1-4 through the growing season. Please come by and let us help answer your gardening questions. The Plant Clinic is located in the County Multipurpose Complex at 4024 Richlands Highway. The Master Gardeners are also on-hand at the Onslow County Farmers Market Saturday location.

Don’t Miss Strawberry Season

April marks the beginning of strawberry season in Onslow County. The berry is season is likely to be short this year so hurry up and get yours. You can find local strawberries at the farmers market or pick your own. We have three pick-your-own strawberry farms in Onslow County:

Aman Family Farms
Jack Aman
2384 Belgrade-Swansboro Rd
Maysville, NC 28555
910.934.2938
Southwest Strawberry Farms
Julian Wooten
2053 Pony Farm Rd
Jacksonville, NC 28540
(910) 347-4835

Mike’s Farm
Mike and Theresa Lowe
1600 Haw Branch Road
Beulaville, NC 28518
(910) 324-3422

Call ahead for hours, pricing and picking information.

RECIPE CORNER

This recipe from the North Carolina Strawberry Project is an interesting savory use for fresh strawberries. Stop by the office for a recipe card and more NC Strawberry Project recipes. Adjust the amount of sugar to suit your taste and the ripeness of the berries. You could substitute another sweetener for the sugar — a mild local honey would probably work.

Spinach and NC Strawberry Salad
Yield: 4 servings
• 2 bunches spinach, rinsed and carefully dried
• 4 cups strawberries, sliced
• ½ cup extra virgin olive oil
• ¼ cup white wine vinegar
• ½ cup white sugar
• ⅛ tsp paprika
• 2 tbsp sesame seeds
• 1 tbsp poppy seeds

In a large bowl, toss together the spinach and strawberries.

In a medium bowl, whisk together the oil, vinegar, sugar, paprika, sesame seeds and poppy seeds. Pour over the spinach and strawberries and toss to coat.

CONTACT US

If you have questions about lawn, landscape or garden problems, contact your local Cooperative Extension office. In Onslow County call 455.5873, Mon – Fri, 8 am and 5 pm, or visit us online anytime at http://onslow.ces.ncsu.edu. While you are there, you can post your questions to be answered by email using the ‘Ask an Expert’ widget (in the upper left hand corner).

SPOTLIGHT

2011 Extension Volunteer Recognition

On January 24th, 4-H recognized Megan Griffiths as the 4-H Volunteer Leader of the Year. Along with Ms. Griffiths, all 4-H volunteers were thanked and recognized for their years of service at the annual 4-H Volunteer Leaders Banquet. The theme this year was “Under the Big Top with 4-H.”

The Onslow County Extension and Community Association (ECA) celebrated their 2011 achievements on February 7th. The speaker for the event was Gloria Wiley, former ECA member. The event started off with a memorial to ECA members that had passed away since the last Achievement Day. Several members were recognized for special awards. They were as follows:

Perfect Attendance: Several members were recognized for attending all of the club’s monthly meetings. One member, Bernice Guthrie, with the Sneads Ferry club, had not missed a single meeting in the past 38 years!

Cofer Leader Program Award: All clubs voted on a member that had presented information during the year. Judges then picked the overall winner from presented reports. This year’s recipient was Cynthia Barber from the Meadow View club.

Most Outstanding Club Member: The following members were by selected by their club:
Jean Ross – Harmony,
Kathy Cook – Jacksonville,
Faye Gould – Meadow View, and
Ruth Clifton – Sneads Ferry.

Most Outstanding Club: Outside judges selected this winner after seeing all the work done by a club’s members. This year’s awardee was the Harmony club.

Extension and Community Associate of the Year: The awardee is an outstanding member who goes above and beyond the call of duty. This year’s award was presented to Faye Gould, from the Meadow View club.

The annual Onslow County Agricultural Awards Banquet was held on February 28th at the Onslow County Multipurpose Complex. Recognition was given to the various groups of volunteers that give of themselves to support and expand the work of the NC Cooperative Extension here in Onslow County. During 2011, Onslow County Master Gardeners volunteered more than 3,500 hours of service to local citizens.

Special recognition was given to several Master Gardeners for their hours of service: Jean Gully, 500 hours; Tom Nicoll, 1,000 hours; and Brian Wheat, 2,000 hours.

Special recognition was given to Jean Gully who was named the 2011 Master Gardener Volunteer of the Year for her devotion to increasing the knowledge level of other master gardeners and the public.

Several local farmers received awards for Crop Production Contests:

Wheat Yield Champion: Donnie Riggs, Pioneer 26R12 with 102.46 bushels per acre. The runner-up was David Collins, Dyna-Gro Shirley with 100.74 bushels per acre.

Soybean Yield Champion: George Pierce, Asgrow 7502 with 43.17 bushels per acre. The runner-up was Sam Pierce, Asgrow 7870 with 43.11 bushels per acre.

The Onslow County Agricultural Hall of Fame Award was begun in 1984. The nominee can only be inducted to the Agricultural Hall of Fame once, as either a recipient of the Master Farmer Award or the James R. Strickland Service to Agriculture Award. This year’s inductee was: Mr. Anthony Rawls, for Master Farmer.

For more information regarding the Extension and Community Association, 4-H, and other programs, please call Peggie Garner at 910-455-5873.