What Winter?

I read somewhere once that Florida DOES have four seasons. They are: early summer, summer, late summer and Next summer. This year we had a protracted late summer, followed by an early early summer with a couple of frosts in between to let us know when one stopped and the other started. That’s a real Florida winter!

Because it’s been warm for some weeks now, some of our readers are afraid they are behind because they haven’t started their gardens. But if you are just starting to set your garden, you’re right in time. See our Garden Calendars for April, May and June to give you some ideas on what to plant and what needs doing in the garden in the next few months. On page 5 you will find another great article from Wendy on the bugs you are likely to see in your garden this time of year. The last of the nine Florida Friendly Landscape Principles, Protecting the Waterfront, is on pages 6 & 7. And our own Agriculture Agent, Jim De-Valerio, has a timely article on fireproofing your yard and house on page 8. As I watch all the caterpillars, insects, critters and bugs massing in my garden, waiting to eat my plants, I realize it is truly early summer; let the chewing begin!

By Laurie Compton

Oakleaf Hydrangea

If you need a shrub that can shine in the shade, oakleaf hydrangea could be just what you’re looking for.

Oakleaf hydrangea (Hydrangea quercifolia) is a coarse-textured native shrub that works well as an understory planting. Each spring they put up huge cone-shaped clusters of white flowers that will stay on the plant for months, eventually changing to a light pink or purple. The leaves turn red, bronze or purple in the fall and may stay on the plant well into winter, though ultimately the plant is deciduous.

Even when its stems are bare, oakleaf hydrangea still adds interest to the landscape thanks to the interesting bark that peels back along its stems. These large shrubs can reach 6 to 10 feet tall and have an even wider spread.

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The Cutting Edge

In the Garden: What to Plant in April

**Annuals:** New varieties of coleus do well in sun or shade and provide vivid colors and patterns for months. Some other annuals to try: celosia, cosmos and impatiens. Plant heat-loving **herbs** including basil, oregano, sage and rosemary. **Vegetables:** Continue planting warm season crops, such as bush or pole beans, cantaloupes, sweet corn, cukes, okra, eggplant and peas. For more ideas on what vegetables to plant, see the Florida Vegetable Gardening Guide on line from the University of Florida, or stop by the Bradford County Extension office and pick up a copy.

In the Garden: What to Do in April

**Pests:** Monitor landscape plants weekly for aphids on tender new growth. Now is a good time to **divide perennials and bulbs.** Divide clumps of bulbs, ornamental grasses and perennials to expand or rejuvenate garden beds, or to pass on to friends.

Many cultural **lawn problems** such as lack of water mimic insect damage. Confirm the damage is being caused by insects before applying a pesticide. **Fertilize lawns.** Apply fertilizer no sooner than mid-April after new growth has started. Choose one with no or very little phosphorus unless a soil test indicates a need for it. A fertilizer containing slow release nitrogen will give longer lasting results. We have so many beautiful **trees** that bloom in the spring–try planting fringe tree, Carolina Silverbell or redbuds. Be sure to **mulch** to conserve moisture during dry times and to minimize weeds.

Source: http://solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu/lawn_and_garden/calendar/

Wildlife Calendar: What to Look for in April

**Bobwhite quail** nest now through September. Watch for **hummingbirds** feeding on blooms of columbine, buckeye, and others. **Black bears** begin moving after winter's inactivity. Beginning of **sea turtle** nesting season on Florida beaches. Blooming **wildflowers** and pitcher plants blanket the wet savannahs of the Apalachicola National Forest.

**Did You Know?** There are six species of insectivorous pitcher plants in Florida. The Hooded Pitcher Plant is frequently found growing in flatwoods and bogs from the northern peninsula south to Highlands and Okeechobee Counties, and west to the central panhandle. They flower in the spring. Hooded pitcher plant is listed as a Threatened Plant.

Source: http://www.wec.ufl.edu/extension/wildlife_info/happenings/may.php
**Annuals** that can take the summer heat include salvia, angelonia, wax begonia and ornamental pepper.

**Bulbs** to plant now are glory lily, gladiolus and Aztec lilies. Planting early-, mid-, and late-blooming varieties of daylily ensures months of color from these low maintenance plants. Continue to plant **herbs** that love the heat; basil, sage and rosemary are some to try. **Vegetables**: Southern favorites to plant now include okra, southern peas and sweet potatoes.

**Pests**: Harmful insects become more active as the weather warms. Watch for thrips, scale and mites on ornamentals. While some yellowing of older leaves on **gardenias** is normal, yellowing of new growth usually indicates a micro-nutrient deficiency. **Lawn insects**: Watch for damage from chinch bugs in St. Augustine and begin scouting for newly hatched mole crickets in Bahia lawns. Apply a fertilizer (not a weed and feed) without phosphorous unless a soil test indicates the need for it. A fertilizer containing controlled release nitrogen will give longer lasting results

**Prevent lawn pests**: Discourage insects, weeds and disease by mowing correctly: St. Augustine and Bahia: Three to four inches. Centipede: One and a half to two inches. Dwarf St. Augustine: Two and a half inches. Zoysiagrass: One quarter inch to two and a half inches. (cultivar dependent)

**Did You Know?** Breeding bird Survey data shows a steady decline in overall population of painted buntings since 1965. Males are targets of trappers for the caged bird trade, especially in Mexico. Listed as a species of Special Concern on the Partners in Flight Watch list.

**Wildlife Calendar: What to Look for in May**

**Painted buntings** nest through summer in northeast Florida. **Bald eagles** begin migrating north. **Alligators** begin to court and make loud resounding 'bellows'. Soft-shell and alligator **snapping turtles** complete egg laying. **Bluegill** are bedding at the full moon. Redbreast sunfish and spotted sunfish begin spawning in rivers. **Pompano** running in the surf in north Florida. **White swamp lillies** dot wet prairies of the Everglades.

Source: http://www.wec.ufl.edu/extension/wildlife_info/happenings/may.php
Annuals that can take full sun during hot summer months include celosia, portulaca, vinca and zinnias. Add color to the landscape with a variety of perennial salvias, including blue sage, ‘Hot Lips’ salvia, Mexican sage and rose leaf sage. Summers warm, rainy weather is the perfect time to plant palms. Make sure you don’t cover the trunk with soil.

Plant heat loving herbs like basil, Mexican tarragon and rosemary. Pinch back regularly to prevent flowering and enhance branching. For vegetables, plant okra, southern peas, lima beans and sweet potatoes. It’s too late to plant tomatoes.

Monitor the landscape weekly for harmful insects. Knowing which insects commonly attack a plant can aid in identification and treatment. June is normally the start of the rainy season, but if rainfall has been spotty, watch for drought stress and irrigate as needed.

Now is the time to watch for nutrient deficiencies in palms and cycads and correct using an appropriate fertilizer. Keep lawn fertilizers away from the root zones of palms. For more information, go to http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ep263.

Many summer flowering shrubs like hibiscus, oleander and crape myrtle benefit from light pruning during the warmer months to encourage further blooming.

It’s breeding season for laughing gulls, least terns, oystercatchers and black skimmers. Mockingbirds may attack pedestrians who wander too close to nesting sights. The Southern flying squirrel is starting it’s breeding season. Cicada emerge from their underground growth period to begin making their classic summer sound. Snook begin moving into inlets and passes.

Did You Know? University of Florida biologists report that mockingbirds recognize and remember people whom the birds perceive as threatening their nests. If the white and grey songbirds spot unwelcome guests they screech, dive-bomb and even graze the visitors heads–while ignoring other nearby strangers.
Few people forget their first (often painful) encounter with fire ants. In Florida, we can find two species of fire ants: the red imported fire ant and the tropical or native fire ant. The red imported fire ant is much more common than the other species in Florida and is native to central South America. Between 1933 and 1945, the red imported fire ant was introduced into the United States in either Mobile, Alabama or Pensacola, Florida.

Fire ant mounds are built from soil and are usually smaller than 18 inches across. If a fire ant mound is disturbed, the ants will emerge aggressively and both bite and sting the source of the disturbance.

The adult ants are red to brown in color with the workers ranging in length from 1/8 to 1/4 inch. The workers live for 30 to 180 days, while the queens may live 2 to 6 years. Once a female has mated, she will find a place to start a new colony and burrow into the soil and lay eggs. After the larvae hatch from the eggs, they take 6 to 12 days to reach the pupal stage and another 9 to 16 days as pupae before emerging as adults. The first adults formed in a colony are typically small. The workers are all sterile females; typical colonies have approximately 80,000 workers.

Fire ants feed on dead animals such as insects, earthworms, and vertebrates (e.g., birds, mammals, reptiles). Workers will also collect sweet substances such as honeydew as well as proteins and fats from houses.

When fire ants attack, they use both their mandibles and their stingers. They first attach to the skin with their mandibles and then inject venom with their stinger. It is the sting that causes the pain and pustule. Stings can result in a range of reactions from localized pain and swelling to anaphylactic shock.

Fire ant mounds may be treated with mound drenches, surface dusts, mound injections, baits, mechanical control, and home remedies. These techniques have various levels of effectiveness depending upon the colony and whether or not the queen is affected by the technique.

By: Wendy Helme-Hartman

Source: http://entnemdept.ufl.edu/creatures/urban/ants/red_imported_fire_ant.htm
Florida boasts over 10,000 miles of rivers and streams, about 7,800 lakes, more than 700 freshwater springs and the second-longest coastline in the United States. Even if you do not reside on a waterfront, the land you live on is directly connected to a nearby water body. That’s because no matter where you live, surface water that leaves your landscape as runoff (either due to rain or over-watering), together with any fertilizers and pesticides in that runoff, will eventually drain into a water body. The contributing drainage area is called a watershed. All watersheds are ultimately connected to each other and to the underground aquifer that supplies most of Florida’s drinking water. So what you do in your yard has further reaching consequences than you might imagine.

**Maintaining Your Waterfront Property:** Waterfront property owners have firsthand knowledge of the special value that lakes, ponds, rivers, streams, and lagoons contribute to Florida’s quality of life. Florida-Friendly waterfront living involves unique challenges and responsibilities, some of which are outlined here. The land along the water’s edge is called the riparian zone and is often a wetland. Some cities and counties require homeowners to establish a buffer zone to protect this area. If there is no buffer zone along your waterfront, add Florida-Friendly, low-maintenance plantings to help filter out pesticide and fertilizer runoff from adjacent lawns and landscaped areas. This shoreline vegetation attracts native wildlife and reduces erosion. It can also help beautify your property, dissipate noise from passing boats and other watercraft, and protect your privacy. For your freshwater shoreline, select native aquatic plants such as softstem bulrush, giant bullrush, common arrowhead, pickerelweed, and maidencane. Remove invasive exotic species like water hyacinth, purple loosestrife, hydrilla, and water chestnut. While shoreline vegetation has benefits, many waterfront homes have man-made structures bordering the water instead of a riparian zone with plants. These structures can also help minimize shoreline erosion. They include seawalls (sea-facing walls on a steeply sloped shoreline exposed to high wind and waves), rip rap (loose, large stones), and gabions (rectangular metal baskets filled with rock). But these structures can cause other problems. Seawalls, for example, can cause erosion on adjoining properties. Whether you live on a natural or man-made water body, it’s important to designate a “maintenance-free zone” of at least 10 feet between your landscape and the riparian zone. This area helps to protect the water from runoff.
Don’t mow, fertilize, or apply pesticides in the maintenance-free zone. Select plants that will do well without fertilization or irrigation after establishment. If your landscape already features a buffer zone that’s larger than 10 feet, you don’t need to create an additional maintenance-free zone. Don’t let grass clippings get washed into the water body; their high nutrient content can cause pollution. Also, pick up all pet wastes deposited in your landscape. Pet wastes contain not only lots of nutrients, but also many harmful bacteria. Waterfront property is often protected by local or state regulations. A permit may be required for activities as diverse as removing vegetation; extending a fence; building any structure; or developing walking, cycling, or vehicular paths. Before building anything on or clearing anything from your property, make sure you contact the Department of Environmental Protection or your local city or county offices or departments related to land development, building, and planning.

**Wetlands:** Wetlands are transition ecosystems between land and water. Bogs, cypress domes, mangroves, swamps, wet prairies, and marshes are all types of wetlands. Some of these wetlands are enormous, like the Florida Everglades. Others may be small and contained entirely on one property. Wetlands play a critical role in reducing flood damage by storing stormwater when it surges and releasing it slowly over time. Wetlands are invaluable in keeping water clean by acting as filters for pollutants, silt, and sediment. Fish, birds, and wildlife depend upon wetlands for food, nesting grounds, migratory stops, and shelter. Wetlands are also valuable to the Florida economy, as they support commercial fisheries and tourist-based wildlife watching.

**Springs:** Florida has the largest concentration of freshwater springs in the world. Floridians and visitors enjoy the recreational opportunities afforded by many springs, including diving, snorkeling, tubing, and canoeing. Springs also serve as important habitats for many fragile plant and wildlife species, and are considered “windows into the aquifer,” because the water they pump out comes from the underground source of most of Florida’s drinking water. But like other water bodies, Florida springs are threatened by population growth, urban sprawl, groundwater withdrawals, and the use of fertilizers, pesticides, and other potential pollutants.

*Source: http://fyn.ifas.ufl.edu/*
Oakleaf Hydrangea

They will perform best if planted in a fertile, well-drained soil, but will tolerate other conditions.

In some climates they can be grown in full sun, but in Florida they need a spot that has partial to almost full shade. Follow UF/IFAS guidelines for planting shrubs, and provide water until the plant is established. After that it should require little irrigation or other maintenance, aside from watering during extended dry periods or pruning occasionally to maintain form.

Source: http://gardeningsolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/giam/plants_and_grasses/native_plants/oakleaf_hydrangea.htm

Be FIRE WISE In Droughty Times

Living in the country has many advantages but the risk of wildfire is heightened because homes are often surrounded by dense forests and underbrush. This is especially true during droughty times since dry vegetation catches on fire and spreads easily on the slightest breeze. We are currently in a horrible drought! Consulting the current FL. Division of Forestry Keetch Byram Drought Index, we can see that Bradford County has very dry soils with a rating of 550.

See http://www.floridaforestservice.com/wildfire/information.html

Home owners should take precautions before a fire starts. Make it easy for fireman to find your home by clearly addressing your mailbox, widening your driveway to 16 feet and creating a 30 foot wide open zone around your home so trucks can maneuver.

Within the 30’ zone:
Remove lower branches and shrubbery from under tall trees so fire cannot climb up into the tree canopy.
Use shrub islands or patches of perennials to disrupt the spread of a fire.
Combustible wood piles, compost piles and gas grills should be at least 30 feet away from your house.
Mowed grass, gravel walkways and moist mulch are acceptable ground covers.
Plant large, leafy, hardwood trees on the east and west sides of your home to keep it house cool.
Remove flammable plants like saw palmetto, wax myrtle, yaupon holly, red cedar, and gallberry.
Less flammable plants include dogwood, viburnum, redbud, sycamore, magnolia, beautyberry, oaks, red maple, wild azalea, sweetgum, coontie, winged elm, black cherry, persimmon, wild plum, sugarberry, Florida soapberry, fringetree, ferns, wild olive, blue beech, hophornbeam, and sparkleberry.

More information can be found at: http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fr076
http://www.floridaforestservice.com/wildfire/firewise_landscaping.html

By Jim DeValerio