Container Gardening in Bradford County

We are so lucky to be living in Florida—there is something that can be planted all year-round. Though it definitely gets a bit colder in North Florida than it did where I lived in Daytona, there is still a lot that can be done in the garden at this time of year. Because I live in the woods on the ’sand hill’, most of my gardening is done in containers. Some of the plants I have successfully grown in containers include lettuce, spinach, cabbage and turnips, which are perfect for this time of year. Requirements for container gardening are about the same as those for in-ground gardening—you need the right amount of light, water, and fertilizer. Also, be sure that the size of the container matches the size of your plant. I have grown 4 cabbages in a 22 gallon pot, but 6 would be too many. The best time to water your container garden is in the morning. This allows the leaves and soil to dry out and helps prevent fungal diseases. Overwatering is the most common reason for container plants dying. Push your finger about an inch into the soil - if it feels moist, don’t water. Water and fertilize your container garden only as needed. Over-fertilization will result in a buildup of salts and will burn the roots of your plants. Fertilize your plants during the growing season. For more information on container gardening go to http://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/gt/container/container.html

by Master Gardener Laurie Compton

Featured Plant: Camellias

Camellias have been a part of the Southern landscape for almost 200 years. They are native to the Orient and were introduced into the US near Charleston, S.C. in 1786. The climate conditions of N. Florida are well-suited for many camellia varieties. Camellias are one of the few plants that flower in the fall and winter. During the remainder of the year their evergreen foliage, interesting shapes and textures and relatively slow growth make camellias excellent landscape plants. Varieties with single tiered or double flowers are available with colors from pure white to brilliant crimson, and with combinations of colors in numerous patterns. Thousands of camellia varieties are offered by commercial nurseries and many are introduced each year from seedlings and mutations. Camellias perform best in partially shaded areas with good water drainage and air movement. The soil must be well-drained as camellias will not grow in wet areas. Camellias prefer slightly acid soils, with soil PH between 5.0 and 6.5, and grow best in fertile soils high in organic matter. Now is the perfect time to plant camellias and start enjoying them in your landscape! For more info on camellias go to http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/EP002

by Master Gardener Joe Kirby
What to Plant in December/ January

● **Bedding Plants:** To add color to a winter garden, plant masses of petunias, pansies, snapdragons, Shasta daisy, calendula and carnations.

● **Bulbs:** Amaryllis is a popular plant for the holiday season. They can be forced to bloom indoors now or can be planted outdoors for spring bloom. In January try crinum, agapanthus and gloriosa lily. Don’t forget to add a layer of mulch for cold protection.

● **Camellias:** Select & plant camellias in January. Visit local nurseries for selection of colors & forms.

● **Herbs:** Plant herbs that thrive in cool weather. Try parsley, thyme, sage, dill, fennel, garlic, comfrey & coriander.

● **Vegetables:** Cool season vegetables to plant in December include English peas, radish, cabbage, beans & broccoli. Continue planting cool season crops in January with turnips and lettuce.

● **Deciduous fruit:** January is the time to plant deciduous fruit trees. This will give roots time to develop before the warm and dry spring months.

What to do in December/ January

● **Lawns:** Continue to monitor for brown patch fungal disease. Limiting the application of nitrogen and irrigating at proper time of day are good preventive measures.

● **Shrubs and trees:** Prune non spring flowering shrubs & trees in January to improve form.

● **Crepe Myrtle:** While crepe myrtles do not require pruning, removing seed pods, crossed branches and twiggy growth improves the appearance and form.

● **Soil test:** A soil test is a good idea if plants didn’t perform as desired this year, or if you are planning new plantings.

● **Compost:** Composting is environmentally friendly & produces a beneficial soil amendment or mulch.

● **Arbor Day:** Florida observes Arbor Day on January 18th. To celebrate, plant a tree in your yard or community.

Source: UF/IFAS Gardening Calendar for North Florida

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**Wildlife Calendar for December/ January**

**December**

● Great horned & barred owls are courting: listen for their hooting

● Bears are still on the move. Watch for them in Lake, Collier, Marion, Highlands, Jefferson, Gulf, Volusia and Hernando counties. They are in Bradford county, also.

● In North Florida, bald eagles start hatching about Christmas day.

**January**

● December & January are best times for watching waterfowl on lakes, wetlands & prairies.

● Nesting season begins for roseate spoonbills, Florida sandhill cranes, hawks & owls.

● Grey foxes, bobcats & raccoons are at the peak of courtship & breeding this month.

● Cedar waxwings and robins are eating fruits like holly berries.

● Male cardinals begin territorial singing later in the month.

● Deer mating season in the Panhandle.

Source: Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission
The Cuban Tree Frog

The largest treefrog in North America is the Cuban treefrog (1.5 to 5 inches in body length), however it is not native to North America. This species was introduced to southern Florida from the Caribbean and has continued to spread in Florida. Cuban treefrogs have been documented as far north as Cedar Key on the Gulf Coast, Jacksonville on the Atlantic Coast, and Starke in north central Florida, and they are expanding their range. Cuban treefrogs are voracious eaters -- and unfortunately they eat Florida's native frogs, toads, and lizards, in addition to insects and spiders. Cuban treefrogs are SO successful at taking over habitat and eating Florida's native species that they are considered an invasive exotic species -- they are a threat to Florida's native ecosystems and wildlife. Some of the distinguishing characteristics of the Cuban treefrog include the size of the adults (up to 5 inches in body length, much larger than native Florida treefrogs), enormous toe pads (larger than toepads of native treefrogs in Florida), bumpy skin on the back, like skin of a toad and the skin on top of the head is fused to the skull.

Cuban treefrogs vary in color -- from pale tan/pale green without any markings to dark green or brown with an even darker color pattern on the back and legs. Sometimes they almost look white when they are inactive or cold. This species prefers habitat that is moist and shady -- in trees, shrubs or around houses. It is commonly found near ornamental fish ponds and well-lit patios. Due to the destructive effects Cuban treefrogs have on native species of amphibians and reptiles, many biologists recommend that Cuban treefrogs be euthanized/killed. Just make SURE the frog you have is a Cuban treefrog before euthanizing it. To report Cuban Treefrogs on your property, send an email to Dr. Steve Johnson of the University of Florida at tadpole@ufl.edu. Please include the county and a street address for mapping purposes. If possible, take a digital picture of the frog to send as an attachment to your email.

Source: http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/UW259

One reason woodpeckers attack our houses is to feed on insects that may have infested our siding. They search vertical surfaces of tree trunks and branches looking for beetles, carpenter ants, and other insects. The pecking style used for feeding is much different than drumming. Only a few pecks are made and then the resulting hole is explored with the bird's bill and tongue. This behavior will continue until an insect is found or the bird is satisfied one is not there. The damage from this activity usually occurs in horizontal lines that follow tunnels made by insects. Woodpecker damage can also occur when they excavate nesting cavities in house siding. Cedar siding is fairly soft and vulnerable to woodpecker attack. Fortunately this is not common. The most effective method of keeping woodpeckers from damaging wood siding is to cover the siding with lightweight mesh nylon or plastic netting hung from the eaves. The netting should be at least 3 inches out from the siding. Woodpeckers can be very persistent and are not easily driven from their territories or selected pecking sites. For this reason, visual or sound types of repellents should be employed as soon as the problem is identified and before territories are well established.
Composting is a great way to reuse yard waste, reduce household waste and create a natural fertilizer for your garden. Composting saves landfill space, and helps your landscape retain water and nutrients, which means less irrigation and less fertilizer in areas treated with compost. Compost piles can range from store bought containers to a loose pile of leaves and lawn clippings in your back yard. The holidays are a great time to compost, whether you have an existing pile or are interested in starting one. Along with kitchen scraps, fallen leaves and frost-nipped vegetation are great for the compost pile. Healthy holiday eating produces lots of coffee grounds, vegetable trimmings, apple peels and such. However, leave out the meat, milk and fat products; they slow the decomposition process and invite unwanted critters. Your compost pile will “cook” slowly in cool weather, but should be ready for your spring garden. What about after Christmas waste? Holly, mistletoe and fir branches may be added to your compost, along with a limited amount of shredded wrapping paper – but no glossy paper or tinsel! You might consider tossing your Christmas tree on a brush pile to offer some cover and protection for wildlife. Trees can also be placed in private lakes and ponds as a fish attraction but putting them in public waterways requires a permit. If your only option is to send your tree to the landfill, take heart. Although legislation passed in the 1990’s limits the amount of yard waste that goes into the landfill, New River Solid Waste puts trees through a chipper to make mulch for their operations. Please remember to remove all ornaments, metal, plastic, etc. For more information about composting go to http://livinggreen.ifas.ufl.edu/waste/composting.html, or come by the Extension office at 2266 N. Temple Ave. and take a look at the compost bin built by Master Gardener dave. I have been turning it and watering it every week, and it’s beginning to turn into great compost. Composting and recycling is good for the environment and good for the spirit!

By Master Gardener Pat Caren

Q. What’s causing the fruit on my orange tree to split right before it ripens?

The fruit pictured here was recently brought to the Bradford County extension office. Although we had a pretty good idea what was causing this condition, we took advantage of the University of Florida experts and contacted Timothy Gaver, the citrus specialist in St. Lucie county. Here’s his answer: “The price to pay for beautiful, thin skinned fruit is “splits” when the tree starts to slow down in the fall and then we get a shot of heavy rain. Increasing the total fertilizer applied over the course of a year (just a little bit) will add more potassium and toughen the peel to resist such events. It’s too late in the year to amend the situation at this time. Remove the split fruit that don’t drop off and start over again next spring”.

Q. My Crown of Thorns has quit blooming. What’s wrong?

Research on Euphorbiae milii (Crown of Thorns) shows that overwatering and over fertilizing will stop flower production. The flowering will also slow and the plants will go dormant under cold conditions (under 65 degrees F), but as long as these relatives of the poinsettia remain dry, they will survive in a dormant state for months. Keep it warm and propagate from cuttings taken in spring and summer.