



Extension Gardener

NC STATE UNIVERSITY

NORTH CAROLINA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

Winter 2014

Empowering
gardeners.
Providing
garden
solutions.

in this issue

SANDHILLS & COASTAL PLAIN NEWS

Warm Winter
Weather

Raised Bed
Vegetable
Gardening

Organic Control of
Fire Ants

Winter Weed
Control

STATE NEWS

Crape Myrtle
Pruning

Chinese Pistache

Extension Master
Gardener
Volunteers

Sprouts

Vermicomposting

Crape myrtle pruning

Crape myrtles should be purchased based on the mature size and form needed for the landscape site. Varieties of crape myrtle ranging from less than 2 feet to greater than 40 feet high are available. All varieties can be grouped into one of three categories based on how they were pruned at the nursery: shrubs, multi-stem trees, and single stem trees. Cultivars that grow less than 10 feet tall are often grown as multi-stemmed shrubs with multiple branches all the way to the ground. Taller growing cultivars with either single or multiple main stems are usually limbed-up to create small to medium trees. Future pruning should follow the training begun at the nursery.

Crape myrtles trained as small trees are often improperly pruned, using a method known as topping. Topping involves removing a major portion of a limb. This leaves behind a stub that is slow to heal and may result in decay. Topping results in numerous weak sprouts that bend under the weight of flowers and often break when blown or weighed down by rain, snow, or ice.

Crape myrtles are often topped because they have grown too large for their location. Know the mature size of the crape myrtle you are purchasing and place it in an appropriate location. That way it can grow freely without the added work of pruning. When planting near a structure, place large growing varieties 15 to 20 feet from a wall.

Another reason often cited for topping is to maintain a view. But when topped, the flush of a low, bushy-growth tree inhibits the view even more than an untopped tree does. You can create views through or under a crape myrtle by removing lower limbs and thinning to enhance its form as a small, open tree.

Because they flower on new growth, crape myrtles are pruned in winter. Winter pruning does not have to be heavy. If needed, small



The trunks of a properly pruned tree form crape myrtle (variety 'Natchez'). ©Charlotte Glen

shrub-form crape myrtles can be pruned to keep them compact and tidy. Larger growing tree-form varieties should be pruned to remove suckers, dead branches, and crossing branches. Cutting out low hanging branches enhances the trunk's beauty.

Summer pruning of a crape myrtle should take place after flowering and be limited to removing suckers at the base of the trunk and possibly removing faded blooms on small plants. Removing faded blooms reduces the weight on the ends of branches. This can result in another set of flowers and help prevent breakage of limbs.

Be careful whom you take advice or direction from when pruning. Don't follow a practice you see someone else doing unless you know the reason they are doing it.

— Danny Lauderdale

Extension Showcase

Paul James, the Gardener Guy, coming to Greenville

January 25, 2014

Paul James, the Gardener Guy and the host of HGTV's "Gardening by the Yard," will be the guest of the Pitt County Extension Master Gardener Volunteers and Friends of the Pitt County Arboretum on January 25, 2014, in Greenville, NC. Paul is from Tulsa, OK, and started doing gardening segments on TV in the late 1980s. He began hosting "Gardening by the Yard" in 1996, and it ran through 2009. The event will feature Paul's humor-based teaching techniques and fun style while he speaks about current trends in gardening and landscaping. Garden newcomers and veterans will enjoy Paul's laid-back style, down-to-earth demeanor, and simplified gardening suggestions. The proceeds support the Pitt County Arboretum, which is an educational program of the Pitt County Center of NC Cooperative Extension, located at 403 Government Circle. The arboretum is maintained by Pitt County Extension Master Gardener Volunteers and is primarily funded through programs like this—along with a plant sale held each year on the Saturday following Mother's Day. Tickets will be sold at the Pitt County Extension Center. For more information call Sarah Roberson at (252) 902-1709.

— Danny Lauderdale

Smart Gardening — Warm winter weather's effect on plants

It is not uncommon for trees and shrubs to burst into bloom with warm winter temperatures. Freezing temperatures follow and damage exposed blossoms and buds. Plants situated on sunny south and southwest sides of buildings are especially vulnerable because of the sun's path. Although only a small percentage of flower buds open during these early displays, spring's blooms will be slightly reduced. Early leaf production may also be reduced, but spring and summer growth will compensate for the loss. Bark split is another concern caused by fluctuating winter temperatures. As warm days give way to cool nights, tissues expand and contract, causing damage.

Protect plant roots from these fluctuating temperatures by applying mulch correctly—no more than 4 inches deep and pulled away from the trunk. Mulch will not warm or cool plants' roots, but will help to maintain a steady soil temperature. To further protect plants from cold injury, follow these recommendations:



©Shawn Banks

- Plant only varieties that are hardy to your area.
- If you have a choice, locate less hardy plants in the highest part of the yard. Cold air settles in low areas.
- Protect plants from wind. A fence or tall evergreen hedge provides good protection.
- Shade plants from direct winter sun, especially early morning sun. Plants that freeze and thaw slowly will be damaged the least. The south side

of the house with no shade is the worst place for tender plants.

- Stop feeding plants quickly-available nitrogen in late summer. Let them "harden off" before cold weather.

- A covering of plastic is excellent protection. Build a frame over the plant or plants, cover with plastic, and seal the plastic down to ground level. This plastic traps moisture and warm air as it radiates from the soil.

It also shields plants from cold winds. Be certain not to allow plastic to come in contact with the plants. Shade the plastic to keep the temperature from building up too high inside.

— Katy Shook

Food Production — Raised bed vegetable gardening

Growing your own vegetables can be rewarding, especially if you prepare your gardening beds for success. If you are new to vegetable gardening, the current trend is to create raised beds instead of tilling a huge area in your yard. It's amazing the amount of produce you can grow in small spaces.

Many gardeners question what the "best" raised bed walls are constructed from: wood, masonry, or synthetic lumber. Natural wood may be better than pressure-treated lumber as no chemical preservatives have been used. Synthetic lumber is a manufactured product. It is made from recycled plastic without the use of chemical preservatives, but there are some concerns about its durability. Stone, brick, or pre-cast concrete (including cinder blocks) can also be used to construct raised beds.

My raised beds don't have walls at all. The soil is mounded up, and I have been quite successful with no erosion issues. The raised bed is

a mixture of soil, compost, and leaf mulch. Soil testing is important to make sure your nutrient and pH levels are optimal for vegetable growing. Soil test kits are available from your local Extension center, and soil testing is free if you submit your samples between April 1 and November 30.

Locate your raised beds where they will receive at least eight hours of direct sunlight. The closer your raised beds can be to a water source and your kitchen, the better. Vegetables that can be planted in late winter (February – March) include cabbage, carrots, lettuce, mustard, onion sets, green peas, Irish potatoes, radishes, rutabagas, spinach, and turnips.

One of my favorite resources is the Home Vegetable Gardening brochure published by North Carolina Cooperative Extension, which can be found online: <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/ag-06.html>

— Cyndi Lauderdale

Pest Alert — Organic control of red imported fire ants

There are no direct ways to eradicate red imported fire ants, but there are several products available for managing them. Fire ant control products include drenches, granules, and baits that contain pesticides. Although most of these products contain synthetic chemicals, some are available with active ingredients that can be used in organic production.

Drenches are mixed with water and poured onto a mound. They provide quick knockdown of the mound but rarely kill all of the ants, making drenches most useful when a mound needs to be quickly neutralized but not for treating a large area. Organic drenches containing the active ingredients D-limonene or spinosad are available from some garden centers.

Baits are insecticides designed to fool pests into thinking the bait is food and are the most

effective and environmentally friendly method of fire ant control. Wait until daytime temperatures are in the 70s (°F) to apply baits. Read the label directions of any product you are thinking about using to find out what rate it should

be applied at and how it should be spread.

Most organic baits contain spinosad as the active ingredient. Brand names of baits that contain spinosad include Ferti-lome® Come and Get It, Green Light® Fire Ant Control with Conserve, and Safer® Brand Fire Ant Bait. Because

brand names change frequently, be sure to check the active ingredient listings on the product before you purchase any pesticide to make sure you are getting the product you want.

— Della King



©Charlotte Glen

Carolina Lawns — Winter weed control

In the NC coastal plain, we mostly grow warm-season grasses that are dormant during the cold winter months. It's great to look out over a mass of dormant grass and see a solid color of brown, gray, or yellow. That is often not the case, however. More often than not, spots of unsightly winter weeds break up the sea of solid color.

Winter weed control can be tricky. As with any weed control program, the weed must first be identified. Next an herbicide needs to be selected that will control the weed without damaging the lawn. Then comes the tricky part. The weed has to be actively growing when the herbicide is applied. Otherwise the herbicide will not be effective. It's best to apply herbicides when daytime temperatures are going to be at or above 60°F. Most weeds don't grow when daytime temperatures are below 50°F. Apply the weed control product before the weed begins to

flower. Once flowering begins, the weed is likely to set seeds that will sprout next year, even if an herbicide has been applied.

Even those strong smelling onions can be controlled, but there is a trick to their control. Add a nonionic surfactant, commonly known as a spreader/sticker, to the herbicide. Read the label to determine which one will work best with your particular herbicide. The job of the spreader/sticker is to allow the water to stick to the waxy leaves, allowing the herbicide to be absorbed by the plant.

Here's another method—the one my mother employed when I was growing up. “Son, get out there and pull up those weeds. Make sure to get the root, so they don't come back.” That little bit of exercise didn't kill me, even if I acted like it would.

— Shawn Banks

Tips & Tasks

A garden journal

A garden journal is an extremely useful garden tool. Winter is the perfect time to set up this tool to aid you all year.

- Use your garden journal to track orders, record planting dates, and note varieties. Tape packing slips or empty seed packets right onto the page, or tuck invoices into a folder pocket. Knowing exactly how much you planted comes in handy later.
- A journal is also useful for tracking pests. If there is a pest emergence pattern, (such as the last two weeks in June or after a heavy rain), you know what to look for and when to look for it as you monitor your garden. You may also find cultivar differences not listed in catalogs. Once I planted three green bean varieties. Mexican bean beetles ate two varieties but left the third variety alone. My journal told me which ones to plant, and avoid, the following year.
- Weather patterns—when you pruned, fertilized, divided perennials; and planting rotations—include them all. Start your journal with your wish list of seeds and plants for spring, and develop a habit of making notes in it when gardening activity picks up.

— Nicole Sanchez





J.C. Raulston Arboretum

Showstopper — Chinese pistache

Tough as nails, drought tolerant, and pest free are all terms used to describe Chinese pistache, *Pistacia chinensis*. This beautiful medium-sized tree is perfect for home landscapes and urban environments in USDA hardiness zones 6 to 9. Though awkward and somewhat unruly when young, Chinese pistache develops into an outstanding specimen tree with an umbrella shaped crown.

At maturity, this tree reaches a height of 40 feet and a spread of 25 to 35 feet. Chinese pistache has finely divided, lustrous green foliage during the summer months and terrific fiery orange and red fall color. This plant will flourish in nearly every soil type as long as it is well drained and does best in full sun. Transplant one into your landscape—you'll be glad you did.

— John Vining

Helping You Grow

Extension Master Gardener Volunteers

The NC Extension Master Gardener Volunteer (EMGV) program disseminates horticultural knowledge to the residents of each county by training volunteers to extend the reach of the local Extension staff. To become an EMGV, you must first complete a 12- to 16-week training course. Most counties offer training in the late winter or spring. Once initial training is complete, participants must complete a 40-hour internship that could include answering gardening questions, serving as a school garden mentor, being part of a speakers' bureau, leading garden tours, and much more. To find out more, visit www.ncstategardening.org or contact your local Extension center.

— Kerrie Roach

Edibles — Sprouts

It is easy to grow nutritious sprouts indoors anytime of year. All you need is a clear canning jar, a jar ring, a soft piece of nylon screen to cover the jar's mouth, tap water, and sprouting seeds. Sprouting seeds lack the coating of pesticide found on some garden seed and can be purchased online or at food stores. To start a batch of sprouts, measure out two to four tablespoons of seeds such as lentils or alfalfa in a quart size jar. Add a cup of clean tap water. Let the seeds soak a couple of hours, then drain. Store the jar on its side in a cabinet. Once a day, open the lid to rinse and drain the seeds. After the seeds sprout, repeat the daily rinsing and draining but store the jar in indirect sunlight. As the sprouts turn green, transfer them to a storage container kept in the refrigerator for use within three to five days.

— Thomas Campbell

Sustainability — Vermicomposting

Vermicomposting turns kitchen waste into a nutritious soil for plants. When mixed with soil, vermicompost enhances its structure, drainage, and moisture-holding capacity. Vermicompost is also teeming with beneficial microorganisms and enzymes, and contains plant growth hormones and humic acids that can increase rates of germination, growth, flowering, and fruiting in crops, usually independent of nutrient availability. In addition, vermicompost can decrease attacks by plant pathogens, parasitic nematodes, and arthropod pests.

The materials for starting a vermicomposting system are simple. All you need are a worm bin, bedding, water, composting earthworms, and food scraps. Either buy a manufactured worm bin or make your own out of wooden or a plastic storage container. Drill holes in the upper sides of the bin for air flow and in the bottom for drainage; do not drill holes in the lid. Place your worm bin indoors or outside, but try to keep the temperature above 55°F and below 85°F. Fill the bin half way with moist, fluffy bedding such as shredded paper, brown leaves, or coconut coir. Add

at least one pound of *Eisenia fetida* earthworms, commonly called red wigglers, that you purchased from a worm grower.

To feed your worms, place small amounts of kitchen scraps in the bin and always cover the food completely with a couple inches of bedding. Do not stir the contents of the worm bin. After four months, harvest the vermicompost that has accumulated on the bottom of the worm bin. For instructions on how to do this and more details about setting up and maintaining a worm bin, visit this site: <http://worms.ncsu.edu>

— Rhonda Sherman



Extension Gardener provides timely, research-based horticultural information. We publish four issues per year. Send comments about **Extension Gardener** to:

Editor and Team Leader
Lucy Bradley, Ph.D., Extension Specialist,
Urban Horticulture
Box 7609, NC State University
Raleigh, NC 27695-7609

Managing Editor: **Charlotte Glen**
Content Editor: **David Goforth**
Regional Editors, Coastal Plain and
Sandhills: **Shawn Banks**
Regional Editor, Piedmont: **Randy Fulk**
Regional Editor, Mountains and Foothills:
Donna Teasley
Production Editor and Designer:
Viki Balkcum

The use of brand names does not imply endorsement by N.C. Cooperative Extension nor discrimination against similar products or services not mentioned.

Distributed in furtherance of the acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914. North Carolina State University and North Carolina A&T State University commit themselves to positive action to secure equal opportunity regardless of race, color, creed, national origin, religion, sex, age, veteran status, or disability. In addition, the two Universities welcome all persons without regard to sexual orientation. North Carolina State University, North Carolina A&T State University, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and local governments cooperating.

©North Carolina Cooperative Extension. **Extension Gardener** may not be reproduced without written permission. Any news media using sections of the newsletter should credit "Extension Gardener, North Carolina Cooperative Extension."

14-CALS-4093—12/13

<http://extensiongardener.ncsu.edu>