Question and answer

Distribute 09-26-2016

Q. Our new home has lots of great pecans and red oaks for shade. The pecans have already started to drop their leaves. The leaves have a pattern of yellow and dark angular splotches. What causes the splotches? If it is a fungus does that mean we should rake up and discard the leaves? We also understand that pecans and oak leaves are loaded with tannin which is not good for the soil, or as a mulch? What do we need to do with these leaves?

A. The pecans always drop their leaves early. This year they have experienced feeding by black aphids. The aphids cause the pattern you describe. Yes, pecan and oak leaves do have tannins as part of their chemistry but the tannins are not a problem in our alkaline soils. Use the leaves for mulch or as raw material for the compost pile. One of the easiest tactics is to mow the leaves where they lay on the lawn. The small pieces quickly decompose and provide organic material and nutrients for the landscape.

Q. As per the plan, my Roma, Surefire, Lavaca, and BHN 968 tomatoes are producing fruit already. The problem is that the birds are attacking them before they are fully ripe. The villains seem to be mostly mockingbirds. It is one thing to share the numerous small fruit such as Romas with the birds but the Tycoon and Celebrity will be ripening in a few weeks, is there a way to protect the larger tomatoes?

A. Bird netting or agricultural fabric draped over the tomato cage works fairly well. The easiest tactic seems to be to pick the fruit as soon as it shows any color and let it finish ripening on the kitchen counter. The birds will still get some tomatoes but the early picking reduces their share.

Q. Our St Augustine grass is yellow and the blades have brown splotches, is it a nutrient deficit or a fungus? What should we do?

A. The brown splotches and yellowing can be caused by fungus. To treat it reduce watering. The lawn is no longer in a growth mode so does not need as much water. Rely on the rain unless the grass goes more than 2 weeks without moisture. Reduction of watering may be enough but application of a lawn fungicide will also help stop the spread of the fungus. The yellowing is related to a nutrient deficiency caused by the fungus. Reducing irrigation and applying the fungicide will stop the spread of the disease but the grass may not completely recover until next spring. There is a debate whether fertilization this fall (now) will help green up the grass. I would consider using a “winterizer” in October if the fungus stops spreading and the lawn begins greening up.

Q. What flowers can we plant in the garden for cut flowers this fall?

A. Use the large snapdragons such as Rocket, stocks, and calendula. Stocks are especially desirable because of the spicy fragrance. They can all be planted as transplants now.

Q. What are the insects that look like torpedoes on the okra? Do I need to control them?

A. The insects are called sharpshooters. They make their living by sucking the juices from plants such as okra and grapes. Their worst impact is that they carry diseases. Not much of an issue on okra but a major problem on grapes. I don’t treat them on okra. They can be killed with Sevin or malathion. Follow label instructions.