

Landscape Issues

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Gardening and managing a landscape in San Antonio is interesting and never simple. Issues to consider this week include preparing peach trees for a big crop year after several years of poor performance; dealing with lace bugs on lantanas with minimum damage to butterflies; and making the decision to let your lawn go dormant.

The peach tree situation is interesting. Peaches and other fruits require a minimum amount of cold winter weather to produce a good spring crop. The recommended varieties are described as “low chill” varieties to match our mild winters. We grow Florida King, Junegold, La Feliciana and other low chill varieties, rather than Elbertas and others because of their high cold requirements.

Two years ago, we did not receive adequate cold weather for the peach trees to “recharge their chemistry”. Instead, most did not bloom and didn’t even set leaves until deep into the summer. Last winter most of the low-chill peaches received adequate chill hours (temps between 45 degrees and 32 degrees F) to reload the chemistry and some produced a good crop. The real return to action, however, should come next spring if two factors occur. The first factor involves the state of the foliage this summer. If you have been able to provide enough irrigation to support a lush foliage growth this summer despite the dry weather, there will be plenty of flower buds. The other factor is adequate cold weather next winter. If we receive 7 to 8 hundred hours of winter temperatures between 32 degrees and 45 degrees Fahrenheit, expect a good peach crop. One factor is in your hands, and one is up to Mother Nature (and global warming?).

For more information on pruning, pest control and other fruit tree care issues visit plantanswers.com.

Lantanas figure prominently in the butterfly and pollinator situation. They are a favorite nectar source in late summer and the fall. Unfortunately, lace bugs attack lantana this time of the year and the sucking insects will cause the foliage to turn dusty-gray and the blooming to end. The normal treatment is to apply a preventative spray with acephate before the lace bugs end the bloom on beds of lantana that have been attacked in past years. For gardeners that are growing “New Gold Lantana” it puts us in a “Catch 22” situation. Treat the lantanas to prevent lace bug damage and the treated plants become a threat to butterflies trying to harvest the nectar. Do not treat the lace bugs and the plants quit blooming and lose both their landscape value and nectar production!

One compromise may be to treat lantana beds that usually get attacked by lace bugs with a Spinosad based insecticide. It is true that organic insecticides can be just as much of a threat to butterflies as manufactured insecticides, but in this case the less potent spinosad may have the capability to control lace bugs and not be as big a threat to butterflies as the systemic acephate is.

Combine the spinosad treatment option with “deadheading” with a string mower when and if the foliage shows any lace bug symptoms. The shallow trimming may speed up the return to full bloom and reduce the threat of the spinosad treated lantanas to butterflies.

If your established lawn is Bermuda grass, zoysia, or buffalo grass, you have the option to let it go dormant this summer instead of trying to keep it green by irrigating within the framework of Drought Restrictions. In many cases that is the desirable choice because it saves water, reduces summer water bills and does not result in any permanent damage to the lawn. The lawn, of course, is brown until the rains start again but it quickly greens up without any lasting damage. Keep the brown lawn mowed on a regular basis and it is just like a green lawn except for the color.

Even St Augustine grass has tolerance for reduced irrigation, especially if the soil depth is 6 inches or deeper and there is some shade. Research in San Antonio verified that even in full sun a St Augustine lawn will survive if it receives irrigation every 3 weeks.