Q&A Distribute 8-17-15

Q. We have a lacebark elm that has been in the ground 5 years and was beautiful. The leaves suddenly turned brown and are hanging on the tree. We have been watering it heavily but it does not seem to be responding. Is there anything else we should do? Is it dead?

A. Unfortunately the lacebark elms are very susceptible to cotton root rot. The symptoms you describe; leaves browning over a short period and holding on the tree, are the classic cotton root rot symptoms. To confirm that it is cotton root rot push on the trunk and dig up some of the roots. Often the tree or other plant will be loose in the ground because most of the roots have been destroyed. If you can find some roots, they will show cottony strings running along and attached to the roots.

If it is cotton root rot, you want to remove the tree and replace it with a more resistant variety such as live oak, Texas red oak or cedar elm. There is a list of cotton root rot resistant plants on plantanswers.com. Cotton root rot is most prevalent in heavy alkaline soils. There is no cure but the availability of organic material helps reduce infection likelihood.

Q. Our St Augustine lawn looked great in June but it is declining now. It has dry spots and is turning straw color. Would it help to aerate and top dress with compost?

A. It is always desirable to aerate and top dress but you will find it easier to do and probably benefit the lawn more if you wait until late this fall or even in February when the lawn will have more moisture available and the aerator can penetrate the soil better. The key now is to water the lawn every week. Do some supplementary hand watering on dry spots. Fertilize with a “winterizer” fertilizer about October 1.

Q When is the last day we can plant tomato transplants and expect to make a crop before cold weather arrives?

A. The sooner the better but if you use large plants in 1 gallon containers that are available at some nurseries and/or use the fast maturing varieties like Surefire and Roma Surprise, the first week in September may not be too late. Of course if the weather cooperates we can add at least another week. Good Luck!

Q. We bought a new home and we are blessed with a large deer population. What are some plants that the deer won’t eat? Are there any blooming plants?

A. Every deer population is a little different in their preferences but most pass up Mexican plum, Texas mountain laurel, esperanza, and thyrallis; all of which bloom. They also usually don’t eat lantana, salvia, iris, vinca, four-o-clock, Mexican honeysuckle, pomegranate, and angelonia. Viburnum, pittosporum, plumbago, and nandina grow and bloom in the shade and are usually not eaten. For a more complete list visit plantanswers.com.

Q. When do you recommend that we start feeding the birds for the winter? We have hummingbird feeders and a bird bath with a dripper. The results have been great and we want to do even more!

A. I begin feeding sunflower seeds, thistle, mixed seed, suet and safflower seed about October 1.