

Gardening Q&A

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Q. Tell us again why you do not recommend the use of “weed and feed” products. Seems like it is an efficient way to address weeds and fertilizers?

A. The problem is one of timing. Here in the South it is best to fertilize about May 1 and it is most effective to attack the winter weeds before April 1. The winter weeds are declining now. It does not speed up the process to apply a weed killer when they are already dying. With “weed and feed” you end up either applying weed killer to dying weeds or fertilizer to weeds. Another issue is that we use slow-release lawn fertilizer for our flowers, vegetables, shrubs, and trees; all of which can be killed or negatively affected by the herbicide in “weed and feed” formulas. I am not the only horticulturist that believes that “weed and feed” is inappropriate for southern landscapes. Check plantanswers.com and other sites on the internet.

Q. Is it too late to fertilize the lawn?

A. No, use a slow release lawn fertilizer such as 19-5-9 and apply it before the end of May if you don't have access to water to irrigate your lawn. If you have irrigation or if we have a rainy June fertilizer will work when applied in early summer.

Q. What are those large brown bugs that are on my tomatoes? They look like they are armored cars with angular corners and rudders on their legs. They fly in masse when I approach the plants. Will they hurt the plants? Should I control them? What is the best control?

A. You are discussing leaf-footed bugs. They are related to stink-bugs. They feed on the fruit by injecting their digestive juice and harvesting the “soup”. They cause scar tissue and discoloring on the tomatoes (and peaches, blackberries) but the fruit can still be eaten. Stink bugs and leaf-footed bugs are hard to control. Sevin is the only insecticide that I have found works well. Follow label instructions.

Q. What are some shrubs we can use that the deer won't eat? We have a new house in deer country and planted Burford holly. The deer destroyed it!

A. In sun consider standard pittosporum, Texas mountain laurel, dwarf Chinese holly, primrose jasmine and both the standard and dwarf yaupon holly. They are all evergreen. Esperanza and thyrallis freeze back most winters but grow to 6ft. every summer and aren't eaten by deer in most neighborhoods. Viburnums work in the sun and the shade.

Q. I have crape myrtles that always seem to have powdery mildew. Is there a difference in the extent that varieties are plagued with the disease? My neighbor's crape myrtles never seem to have the problem and they bloom over a much longer season. Do you think he is treating them or are their differences in susceptibility between varieties?

A. You should ask him what variety he has and whether he treats them with anything to prevent the mildew. I suspect he does not treat them and he has one of the Indian named or other more modern selections. Most of the new selections are mildew resistant. The best strategy may be to replace your plants with a mildew resistant variety. Your favorite nursery probably has a list of mildew resistant selections. You can also find the information on plantanswers.com.

Q. We have some branches on our live oak that make it dangerous to mow our lawn. It was okay when my husband did the mowing, he was careful but now my grandson is our lawn worker. Can we do some emergency pruning if we paint the wounds to prevent oak wilt?

A. Check with your city ordinances but most allow pruning now if you immediately paint the wounds. If your ordinance has limits based on the calendar, see if there are exceptions allowed for your type of emergency. Otherwise your grandson must just be careful or grandpa will have to be the mower again.