

Gardening Q&A

08-20-2018

Q. When should we fertilize the lawn for the fall and what kind of fertilizer should we use?

A. Fertilize on or about October 1 with "Winterizer" fertilizer with a 3-1-2 ratio. A common formula is 18-6-12. Grass in the fall uses the nutrients from fertilizer to reorganize their internal chemistry to be more cold resistant. The fall fertilization also contributes to a fast green-up next spring.

Q. My neighbor is thinning out his iris bed and he asked whether I want some of the rhizomes. I think I do but tell me about iris and how to grow them.

A. Iris are an excellent plant for use in Central Texas landscapes. It is very drought tolerant and the deer do not eat the blooms or foliage (in most cases!). Plant them in full sun in well drained soil that dries out between rainfalls. Plant the rhizomes so the top of the rhizome is level with the soil surface. Don't bury the rhizome. You can immediately plant the thinned-out rhizomes, or you can store them in a paper sack until it is convenient. I usually leave the full leaves on the rhizomes that I am transplanting but you can also cut them back to form a fan. Plant the rhizomes with 18 inches between each plant. They usually do best when thinned out every 3 or 4 years.

Q. Explain again about dealing with the fire ants in our okra plants.

A. Fire ants will "farm" aphids on okra plants and they will also feed on the flower buds. It is difficult to harvest the pods (they will bite you!) unless you at least spray them off the plant with a water spray. It also works to apply a bait like Amdro outside the vegetable garden. The ants will carry it to their mounds and kill them within 2 weeks. If you find a fire ant insecticide with Spinosad as the active ingredient, it can be applied within the vegetable garden.

Q. Why isn't our duranta blooming yet? Last year it was loaded with Queen and Monarch butterflies. The foliage looks good but no flowers. The esperanza, firebush, thryallis, and poinciana growing in the same area are in full bloom.

A. I believe most gardeners are having the same performance from duranta this summer. It may be that the cold weather we had last winter was not enough to freeze the plants back, but it destroyed the flower buds? Be patient, I think it will begin blooming in September.

Q. Our neighborhood does not have oak wilt, but the shade tree cover is dominated by live oak and Texas red oak. I understand it is best not to be dominated by oak wilt susceptible species as insurance against the disease. What other species should we consider for a new planting?

A. We used to recommend the white oaks such as bur oak, chinkapin, and Mexican white oak because they are less susceptible to oak wilt. We aren't so sure anymore. White oaks may have escaped the disease because they weren't planted. It is best to consider cedar elm, Mexican sycamore, anaqua, Montezuma cypress, Arizona cypress, and other non-oak species.

Q. Some small caterpillars are eating the tips of our Texas mountain laurel shrubs. It was an emergency because of the damage so I sprayed malathion. It worked to control the caterpillars, but I am worried that it will hurt the butterflies as well? What should I have done?

A. Malathion does a good job of controlling caterpillars, but you could also have used one of the Bt products such as Dipel or Bio-Worm Killer. The Bt products only affect feeding caterpillars on the foliage where it is sprayed. The spray is also only potent for 5 or 6 days and won't hurt nectar sipping butterflies. Keep a supply of Bt on hand for emergencies with feeding caterpillars.