

## Gardening Q&A

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Q. Our St Augustine lawn has large brown areas in full sun. A lawn care company said it is chinch bugs and they will spray an insecticide for us. The cost is rather high, and we want to be sure that the action will solve the problem. Do you agree with the lawn care company? Is there any alternative to consider?

A. It certainly could be chinch bugs. To confirm you check the edge between the green and brown areas. If it is chinch bugs you should see some small insects with diamond shaped wings at the base of the grass plant. It is not unreasonable to ask the lawn company rep to point out some of the bugs. Another issue that is causing a lot of browning is the heat and lack of water. Even if you irrigate the amount of water may not be enough to keep the grass that is in full sun green. Conduct this experiment. Identify 3 squares that are 2ft by 2ft and every day for one week and generously hand water them. If the heat and lack of water is the cause of the browning, the test plots should respond by showing some greening.

It then becomes a matter of adjusting the length of time you irrigate the area. St Augustine grass will survive with the addition of water every two weeks. You can quit watering and let Bermuda and zoysia grass go dormant. They will recover when the rains return.

Q. What is the story on putting red food coloring in the hummingbird feeder sugar solution? We have done it for 30 years and as far as I know it has not injured one of the thousand of hummingbirds that have fed at the feeders. Now, however, some folks in my garden club say that it is detrimental to the birds' health.

A. The food coloring is an issue to consider but as far as I can find there is no documented evidence that the food coloring threatens their health. The claims of a problem are based on unproven assumptions. The next time someone makes the claim, ask them to show you the documentation. If they do, please make it available to me. It is true however that the addition of the coloring is not necessary. The hummingbirds are attracted to the brightly colored feeders even if the sugar water is clear. It also appears that the parents of hummingbirds introduce their young to the feeders even if the sugar water is clear. An interesting experiment is to offer both colored sugar water and clear to see which is consumed the fastest.

Q. When can we begin planting our winter vegetables?

A. Mid-September is a good time. Plant broccoli, cabbage, Brussels sprouts, kale, cauliflower, and Chinese cabbage transplants. Plant radish, beet, turnip, carrot, rutabaga, and lettuce seed. Wait until October for spinach transplants, and December for onion transplants.

Q. Is there any preemergent herbicide that prevents the germination of both broad-leaf and grassy weeds? We are overrun by both rescue grass and henbit! It is time-consuming and expensive to have to use two products.

A. The labels of XL and Amaze lists both grassy and broadleaf weeds including the 2 weeds you named. I have been pleased with their performance in that regard. You might also check the Dimension label.

Q. Our nursery as not carried the usual supply of zinnia transplants this summer. He says they are not available from the wholesale growers. Is it too late to plant seed?

A. If the weather stays warm the hot weather annuals should last until Thanksgiving. Plant the seed quickly. You may also want to look for marigold transplants or consider vincas. They seem to be available.