

Ask A Master Gardener

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Nancy Dombrowsky, Carroll County Master Gardener Extension Volunteer

I Just Love Surprises! (Sometimes)

Q. What are some of the differences between Northern and Southern Gardening?

A. I admit it. I am a Northern transplant. My husband and I started out looking for a place to escape from the winter snows and ended up in Villa Rica. That was six years ago and I am still being surprised by the differences between Northern Gardening and Southern Gardening. I am having to rethink timetables for planting, pruning and dealing with garden pests.

We came for our first visit in the fall and I remember seeing a sign “The Pansies are here!” I thought “Wow, that place must be closed or the employees are really lazy.” Pansies are a spring flower in the north. I love pansies; they are one of my favorite annuals so you can imagine how excited I was when I realized that I could keep them outside my door all winter. The best time for planting pansies is the beginning of October. They require soil temperatures between 45 and 65 F. If the soil temperature falls below 45 degrees, the roots shut down and stop functioning. If you purchase healthy, disease free plants that have compact crowns and deep green leaves you will have a remarkable winter annual capable of surviving temperatures down to the single digits, freezing solid, then bouncing back with vigor when warm weather returns. I hope you planted your pansies, I know I did.

Another surprise was timing of winter planting and pruning. In the north, we plant trees and shrubs in late spring or early fall, not in the middle of February. In Georgia, I quickly realized that work in the garden never stops. Trees and shrubs get planted in the middle of winter so that their roots have a chance to get established before the extreme heat and dryness of summer months. This makes a lot of sense when you think about it.

A lot of the established trees and shrubs get trimmed and pruned in the winter. As a general rule, plants that flower before May should be pruned after they bloom, while those that flower after May are considered summer-flowering and can be pruned in the winter months, just prior to spring growth. Examples are crape myrtle and abelia. There are two exceptions to this rule. One exception is the oakleaf hydrangea, a summer-flowering shrub that forms flower buds the previous season. Another exception is late-flowering azalea cultivars, which bloom during May, June or even July. Both the oakleaf hydrangea and the azalea cultivars should be pruned right after they bloom. Otherwise you can spend those nice winter days trimming and pruning. For more information on pruning refer to *Pruning Ornamental Plants in the Landscape* by retired UGA horticulturists Gary L. Wade and James T. Midcap.

My last surprise was not a pleasant one. I was introduced to fire ants as I was working in one of my raised beds. I was stung as I was watering some newly planted shrubs. My first thought was “I don’t know what all of the fuss is about, they are just little stings.” I did not do anything about the sites of the stings. Two days later when I had raised pus filled spots at the sites of the stings, I re-evaluated.

There are two species of imported fire ants, the red imported fire ant and the black imported fire ant. They can infest lawns, school yards, athletic fields, golf courses and parks. Fire ants can invade compost piles and mulched flower beds where they seek warmth and moisture. They can also nest under cracked pavement, removing dirt from underneath sidewalks and driveways, aggravating any structural problems.

They can pose a medical threat to people and animals. If the only symptoms are pain and the development of pustules, stings can be treated with over-the-counter products that relieve insect bites and stings. If a sting causes severe chest pain, nausea, severe sweating, loss of breath, serious swelling or slurred speech, the person should be taken to an emergency medical facility immediately.

If you are having trouble with fire ants there are a number of treatments available. They include natural controls. Armadillos, birds, spiders, and horned lizards have been known to eat fire ants but are not known to have a major impact on imported fire ant populations. There are home remedies that include pouring very hot or boiling water on the mound when the ants are close to the surface, but will only kill 60 percent of the colony and kill plants the water comes in contact with. There are also insecticides and baits which you can find at any lawn and garden store. Just make sure the product you choose meets your needs and you apply it at the right time. Please, if you do not know what fire ants look like, familiarize yourself with them before spring. UGA Extension has a wonderful publication that you can download “Managing Imported Fire Ants in Urban Area”. Avoid the pain and aggravation that I experienced and enjoy your garden fire ant free.

For more information or answers to any of your gardening questions, contact a Carroll County Master Gardener Extension Volunteer at 770-836-8546, via e-mail at ccmg@uga.edu or visit our office in the Ag Center at 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton.