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Summer Survival in North Texas (Keeping your yard beautiful even when it's hot!)

If there's one consistent thing about Texas weather, it's this: While our summers can be cloudy, clear, windy, or still, they're ALWAYS hot! It's relatively easy for a gardener to keep a beautiful yard in the spring and fall, but the summer puts our landscapes to the test, one that only the prepared gardener will pass. This handout and class look to share tips and helpful information to help YOU keep your yard beautiful, and beat the heat!

I. Getting Started

The following tips may seem obvious, but they bear repeating - your yard won't hold up to the summer's heat if you wilt before you can give it the care it needs!

- **Wear Sensible Clothing and Sunscreen:** Spending more than an hour or so working in the garden in the summer sun can net you days of sunburned discomfort if the clothing you're wearing isn't providing protection. Make your clothing choices carefully and wear a large hat. Sunscreen is also helpful. Don't neglect your sun protection on cloudy days - it's even more important on those days because you won't feel the sunburn until you're "cooked".
- **Drink Until You Slosh:** Before going outside to work, drink a tall glass of water. Then drink more water or your favorite electrolyte drink (Gatorade, Powerade, etc.) every hour or so while you are working outdoors. You'll need this much liquid to avoid heat headaches and exhaustion. Don't wait until you are thirsty to get a drink!
- **Get Started Early:** The cooler morning hours will easily be your most productive in the summer. Get up with the chickens to do your gardening, and get done before the mid-day heat really sets in.
- **Insect Repellent:** Prevent the discomfort of mosquito bites by using a labeled insect repellent, particularly before working in shady or moist areas. Use a repellent containing DEET, lemongrass oil, or citronella oil.

II. The Basics of Summer Lawn Maintenance

There are a few things any turf grass needs to survive and thrive. Here are the main pointers for our area:

- **Sunshine:** This is the first thing any turf needs to do well. If you're getting less than five hours of direct sun, many turfgrasses will have difficulty taking hold and growing vigorously. If you cannot provide enough sun by trimming trees or moving things, it's time to consider a bed of ground cover. No turfgrass will do well in deep shade.
- **Mowing:** Building a fine turf begins with mowing regularly, and at the correct height. Most turfgrasses should be mowed weekly for the best look. Mowing every 4 to 5 days would be ideal for Bermuda, but at least a weekly. Do not let your turf grow too tall so you can avoid the need to cut more than a third of the green growing blades off at any one time, as that places additional stress on the grass.

The following are mowing heights for common grasses (This is the tallest recommended cutting height):

- Bermuda - 1.5"
- St. Augustine - 2.5"
- "Tif" Bermuda - .5-.75"

- Zoysia - 1.5-2"
- Fescue - 2"-3"
- Buffalo grass - 1.5-2"

You may mow up to .5" taller during droughts or if the area is subject to heavy traffic. It's important to not allow your turf to become too tall. Your grass will brown out for lack of sufficient sun at the base, and those areas will not green back up until the grass is short-mown and allowed to regrow, something normally done during the late winter only. Tall turf is a weak turf, and a turf that is far more prone to weeds once you do finally cut it back down to size.

Not only is it easier to simply mulch the lawn clippings and leave them where they fall, it's much better for your turf, as long as you're mowing often enough. Short clippings quickly compost down at the soil level and feed your lawn, and the nutrients from clippings can start to re-enter the turf in as little as ten days! Just use a good mulching blade.

Never mow when the turf is wet. Not only is your cut ragged and uneven, you will easily spread lawn diseases if they are present.

- **Watering** - A turf that survives and holds your grade doesn't take a lot of water, particularly if you don't care if it's dormant looking during midsummer. A lush, green lawn does however. Which do you want? During severe drought, your lawn can survive with a single watering per week. It will look tired, but will recover quickly after watering resumes.

During the summer, we recommend a minimum of two solid waterings a week; or as often as every other day if you're feeding your lawn heavily for the best green look. Watering more than every other day is not recommended as it can lead to shallowly rooted grass and increase disease spread.

- **Fertilizing** - Most lawns, particularly Bermuda lawns, need to be strongly fed with a good slow-release nitrogen fertilizer, preferably with iron and sulfur. We recommend our own **Covington's Premium or High Performance lawn fertilizers** for all common turfgrasses in North Texas. It will give you a good solid push of greening that won't quickly wear out like many fertilizers will. For organic maintenance lawns, your choice of lawn fertilizer will probably vary, but something with at least 4% available nitrogen is desirable for your lawn's upkeep. Try our **Milorganite Organic Nitrogen Fertilizer 5-2-0** or **Good Natured Make-it-Green 4-1-2**. "Grasscycling", by mulching and leaving your clippings where they fall, also helps.
- **Weed Control** - Weed control, to be effective, is done using both **pre-emergent** and **post-emergent** herbicides. In the summer, you're either too late or too early to apply pre-emergent herbicides. They are an important part of your weed control picture, though, so refer to the "Easy-Timing Calendar" on our website for application timing. To kill the weeds active right now in your lawn, spray broad-leafed weeds with our **ferti-lome Weed-Out**. Spot sprays of **Hi-Yield Kill-Zall** can be used in any turf to kill individual clumps of grassy weeds. This spraying will kill anything you contact with the herbicide, but it has no active soil residue and the surrounding lawn will quickly regrow into the kill areas as long as those areas are not overlarge. Be careful to spray only the weeds, not the turf around them.

As a note, "Weed and Feed" type fertilizers, no matter who makes them, are terrible. Most post-emergent herbicides work better through leaf absorption, and are better applied as a spray. Weed and feed fertilizers are either watered in (to wash the fertilizer off the blades of grass, highly desirable) and don't kill everything you wanted killed, or you choose to leave the granules stuck on to the blades of your grass which stresses the lawn from fertilizer sticking directly on the foliage. Additionally, the rotary spreaders most of us use can easily scatter granules into flowerbeds or over the root zones of trees. The most effective weed and feed fertilizers put so much active herbicide into each bag that they more or less work on a lot of your weeds, but it's a bit like using a hammer on a granite countertop to kill a gnat. It works, but you sure wish you hadn't done that to your counter. Leave any weed and feed fertilizer, made by anyone, on the shelf.

III. Water Conservation and Tricks We Recommend for Everybody

- **Sprinkler Audit** - Do this now if you haven't, and do it every spring on a regular basis. A sprinkler audit is simply you checking each zone of your sprinkler system to ensure it's throwing evenly, all heads are working properly, aren't blocked with trash or bugs, and that you've got it on for long enough at each station. We also call a sprinkler audit the "Tuna Can Test", because it's simple to put low bowls or cans out in several locations through a zone to see how much water each area is getting. Your eyes can trick you on the amount of water you think you see going out, but a tuna can and a ruler won't steer you wrong. We recommend a half inch of water per irrigation cycle. If you're getting a lot of run-off, split this watering into two cycles on the same morning - for example, if 15 minutes runs off but your sprinkler test says you need 15 minutes to make a half inch of water, split it into two eight-minute waterings a couple of hours apart. Most sprinkler systems will easily support this.
- **Common Sense With Sprinklers** - If we've had so much rain that you're pretty sure you saw an Ark floating down Main Street, **please** turn your sprinklers off until we dry out. It's a huge waste of water to irrigate a soaking wet lawn, and it costs you money! Many newer sprinkler systems have automatic rain sensors that shut off your sprinkler system if we receive enough rainfall. Consider installing a sensor so you don't have to remember to turn the sprinklers off. Then don't forget to turn your system back on when we start to dry out once more.
- **Core Aeration** - Rent a core aerator and run it across your entire lawn, especially Bermuda lawns, at least every few years (more often for high traffic areas). Golf courses aerate greens several times per year. Your lawn will look torn up for a few days, but will quickly heal together and be better for the aeration by having a less-compacted soil to grow in. Your lawn will take water better, root more deeply, and have fewer diseases.
- **Wetting Agents Can Help** - If you have an area of turf or flowerbed that just seems to be impossible to wet, a wetting agent can help! Wetting agents help water penetrate a tight soil by reducing the surface tension of individual droplets, and when soaked thoroughly into a patch of soil, help establish pathways for the water you apply to more easily penetrate the soil for subsequent waterings. Our Lawn & Garden Services team can apply this for you! During the severe drought of 2006-07, lawn areas treated with this material stressed a lot less than areas surrounding, even during the most severe water restriction periods.
- **Soil Moist** - This is a long-chain polymer that grabs on to water anytime it's available, slowly releasing that stored moisture to the soil around the material as the soil dries and needs moistening. It is very helpful for flower beds and outstanding in any potted plants you have outside during summertime. **Soil Moist** won't let you go for days and days without watering, it simply helps your plants not hit a critical shortage of water between irrigation cycles. Think of it like drinking water from a sports bottle during a marathon. You're still very thirsty at the end of the race, but you haven't collapsed!
- **Mulch EVERYTHING** - Mulching is the best thing you can do for any of your bedding area or flowerpot plantings. A 2" or better layer of mulch prevents wind and sun strike to the top few inches of soil, retains moisture and nutrients, and moderates extreme heat stresses in the summer. A nice thick layer of mulch also prevents most weed problems.
- **The Hose Is Your Friend** - Sprinkler systems are an outstanding labor saving device, but no substitute for occasional hose watering in the summertime! You can prevent unnecessary extra cycles of your entire sprinkler system, and overwatering of your dry-soil loving plants, by giving your water-loving plants any extra watering they need with your hose. All newly-installed trees and shrubs will need periodic thorough soakings with a hose during the first two summers in addition to whatever cycles your irrigation system is set normally to run. Refer to "Tree Care for the First Two Years" on our website for details. Do a bit of hose watering and you'll save money AND have better looking plants.

- **Use The Right Kind Of Sprinkler** - The thin-jet oscillating sprinklers that shoot water high into the sky, going back and forth like the pages of a book, are the least useful type of sprinkler for watering lawns or plants (although they're fun for kids to play in!). Use lower-slung, larger droplet size spinning type sprinklers, or pulsating sprinklers. Small droplets of water flung high in the air evaporate at an astonishing rate on a hot and sunny day, while larger droplets with less hang time manage to get most of the water to ground level. If you've seen professional mist systems for outdoors, and walked through them at amusement parks or playgrounds, you will note that you usually aren't wet when you finish walking through them, even though they're probably putting out an ounce of water at you every second. Go for larger droplet sizes.
- **Plant Appropriately For The Heat** – Plant flowers and shrubs that can thrive in our heat, especially in your full sun areas! Choosing sun-loving bedding plants that will tolerate our hot dry summers such as zinnias, moss rose, pentas, lantana, for example will help you to reduce the amount of watering you'll need to do during our hottest season.
- **Drip Irrigation** - Drip irrigation and soaker hoses are two good ways to conserve water! It takes more setup time to prepare an area for drip irrigation, but the payment you'll find in lowered water bills and plants with fewer leaf disease issues make drip irrigation a great way to go in certain types of beds, i.e., established shrub rows.

IV: The Basics of Summer Garden and Landscape Maintenance

Most flowerbeds are easy to care for during the summer if you follow a few simple rules:

- **Pruning:** There is not much pruning necessary in the summer other than some touch-up shaping here and there. Pruning spring-blooming shrubs at this time should be kept to a bare minimum so you preserve next season's show. Summer-blooming and "green" shrubs can be pruned whenever needed, but limit your pruning to necessary shaping and leave major pruning for the late winter. Prune spent roses to encourage re-bloom whenever possible. It's fine to remove a few branches on your shade trees to thin or raise canopies up at this time. Prune the spent flowers off of spring-blooming perennials, but leave the foliage up on these plants to store food in the roots.
- **Feeding:** Most shrubs don't need to be fed during the summer if they were fertilized in the spring. Notable exceptions are roses and crape myrtles, which should be fed at regular intervals of every 6-8 weeks for the best show. Annuals, perennials and vegetable gardens should be fed regularly, either with granular fertilizers every month or two (depends what you use) or water-soluble fertilizer weekly.
- **Watering:** Make sure your beds are well-mulched, and then water your shrub beds one or two times per week, based on the needs of your plant selections. A few special notes for specific plants during the summer are:

Begonias - Water daily during hot weather, but make sure your irrigation system waters them in the early morning. If watered after 9-10 am in summer, they can burn around the edges and look 'melted'.

Azaleas - As long as you have good drainage, water azalea beds daily during very hot weather. It isn't important that they be heavily watered more than a couple times per week, but the leaves stress easily in low-humidity air during high heat days. A light sprinkler run (3 or 4 minutes or so) each day for an azalea bed with a couple of good solid soakings a week will keep the top of the soil moistened and more humidity in the air around the azaleas, preventing undue stress.

Roses - Roses are far more drought tolerant than most give them credit for, but they need regular moisture in the summer for the best blooming performance. The key is to water the soil around roses, and not spray the leaves constantly, as rose leaves that are constantly moist are prone to fungal diseases!

- **On The Lookout:** There are a handful of plants, used by practically everyone in North Texas, which can have some pretty serious issues in the summertime. Here are the most common issues to watch out for and what you can do about them!

Crape myrtles, Felt Scale – Felt scale is a ‘new’ pest to our crape myrtles and didn't exist in North Texas until recently. These soft bodied white insects attach themselves all up and down the stems of crape myrtles, sucking sap and vigor from the plant. They'll almost never kill a crape myrtle outright, but they can sure make one look terrible! Drench with our **ferti-lome Systemic Insecticide** for a one-shot, season long control.

Roses, Magnolias, and Gardenias, Thrips - Thrips won't cause serious damage to any of these plants, but they'll tear up the blooms, making their beauty and show a shadow of what they should be. Thrips get into the blooms while they're still tightly budded, and suck sap from the bases of petals. Drench with **ferti-lome Systemic Insecticide** or use **Bonide Systemic Spray** on the blooms and foliage to control and prevent these critters.

Many Types of Shrub and Turf, Various Fungal Leaf Diseases - Most fungal leaf diseases don't grow well during the summer because of the drier environment, but if you're wetting the leaves of your plantings constantly with sprinkler irrigation, these diseases can take hold and spread. Avoid watering in the late evening with sprinklers, and adjust your sprinkler heads to water soil areas instead of splashing leaves. Treat bits of fungal infestation when present with **ferti-lome Systemic Fungicide** spray.

Nearly Anything, Aphids - Aphids can infest the new growth of hundreds of different types of plants. These pests will rarely kill anything but they can weaken and stress your plants. If you only have a few of these pests, leave them alone and let natural predation take care of the problem. If a plant is being seriously impacted by the critters, nearly any plant insecticide will work, but apply on 3-day intervals to eradicate the pests faster than they reproduce.

It's important to note the "leave them alone" aspect of this - leaving a small population of plant pests will encourage populations of beneficial insects that can help you prevent major pest problems in the first place, but most insecticides applied to kill pest species will also kill the "good guys". If you need to treat for pests, do so thoroughly until the pests are gone, as you're also killing the natural controls that would help keep them in check.

V. Resources

To read articles suggested or to find other information and tips to ensure your gardening success, go to our website www.covingtonnursery.com Planting Advice and Articles Section on the Homepage:

- **Conventional Easy-Timing Calendar**
- **Tree Care for the First Two Years**
- **Lawn Care in North Texas**
- **Garden Soils and Vegetable Selection in North Texas**
- **Monthly Gardening Tips (Conventional and Organic)**