This month I want to discuss the essentials of lawn care. Summer lawns that have been dormant all winter have greened up and begun to grow, and winter lawns are beginning to slow their growth before the heat of the summer. There must be a lot of confusion about what needs to be done and when, because we get a lot of phone calls at the Cooperative Extension office about how to care for lawns.

Creating a healthy lawn is key to having a beautiful lawn. Keeping weeds out of the lawn is easy if the grass planted is maintained properly. Proper maintenance includes mowing at the proper height. For tall fescue the proper height is 3 to 3.5 inches. This height will help prevent weeds, keep the root system cool, and encourage a deep root system that will be able to reach water and nutrients to prevent stress. The proper height for summer lawns is as follows Bermudagrass 0.75 to 1 inch, Centipedegrass 1 inch, Zoysiagrass 1 inch, and St. Augustinegrass 2 to 3 inches.

Something to consider when deciding when or how frequently to mow the lawn; you should never remove more than 1/3 of the leaf blade at any one mowing. A good example of this is to cut Bermudagrass to 1 inch when it reaches a height of 1.5 inches. Removing more than 1/3 of the leaf blade shocks the lawn causing it to slow its growth to recover from the severe loss of food production area. This allows weeds the opportunity to get the jump on the lawn and become established.

A sharp lawnmower blade improves the look of the lawn. A sharp lawnmower blade will cut the grass for a smooth, even look. A dull lawnmower blade will beat or tear the grass for a ragged, dull look.

Mow when the grass and soil are dry. This will reduce the chances of spreading a turf disease. Most fungal diseases on lawns need a wet surface in order to infect the leaf blade. Cutting the grass when it is wet not only provides the moisture, but also creates an open area (the fresh cut) where the fungus can easily enter the leaf.

Using a mulching mower or letting the grass clippings lay on the lawn...
can reduce the fertilizer application by 20 to 30 percent. If the clippings are in piles and are shading the grass, it’s advisable to remove the clippings rather than have them do damage to the lawn.

Proper fertilization of the lawn will greatly improve the health of the lawn by providing it with the nutrients needed to continue vigorous growth. Fertilizing the lawn at the wrong time can increase the likelihood of certain diseases. A great example in our area is fertilizing Centipedegrass too early in the spring or giving it an extra boost in the fall can make it more susceptible to large patch disease.

Proper irrigation can also play a big role in keeping a lawn healthy. Watering every other day just because the water restrictions say you can creates a shallow-rooted grass that gets stressed quickly when water restrictions get even tighter. A deep watering once a week is better for the grass. Deep watering trains the plants to find the water deep in the soil. When there is a drought the roots will already be deep down where the available water is located.

To get the water down deep in a heavy or clay soil you may need to cycle the irrigation. This means water the area for as long as it takes for water to begin running off the surface, then move the sprinkler or change the watering zone to another area. Give the water that has already been applied time to work down into the soil (about an hour or more), then come back and add more water until the water begins running off the surface again. Repeat this until about 1 inch of water has been applied to the area. In sandy soils water may need to be applied twice a week depending on how fast the soil dries.

For more information on lawn maintenance you can pick up a copy of the publication Carolina Lawns: A Guide to Maintaining Quality Turf in the Landscape or a copy of the lawn maintenance calendar for your particular lawn. For those with access to the internet the website TurfFiles has both publications mentioned above plus a Turfgrass Irrigation Management System (TIMS) that can help you apply the proper amount of water each week by taking into account the amount of rainfall in your area and the amount of water used by the plants. If you have questions that need to be answered you can call the Cooperative Extension office at 919 989-5380.

**Featured Plant**

**Caladiums for Sunny Sites**

*Caladium*

By Shawn Banks

That’s right it says sunny sites and caladiums in the title. When someone recommended this as the feature plant, I just about fell over with laughter. I have tried to grow caladiums in sunny sites before. The results of these attempts were always sun-scorched, raggedy leaves. I came to the conclusion that caladiums were for partial to full shade, without exception.

I did some research and found that there are some caladium varieties that are sold and even recommended for sunny sites. An article from Texas Cooperative Extension states, “The most sun-tolerant caladium cultivars, according to
observations in Texas and Florida are Candidium, F.M. Joyner, Fire Chief, Frieda Hemple, Balaxy, Gingerland, Gypsy Rose, Kathleen, Lord Derby, Pink Beauty, Postman Joyner, Red Flash, Rose Bud, Sea Gull, Scarlet Beauty, and White Queen.” If they can grow caladiums in full sun in those two southern states, we should be able to grow them in full sun here in North Carolina.

If you have had success growing caladiums in the sun, let me know. I would be interested to learn what varieties you have found perform well in full sun. For a list of cultivars that had some good sun tolerance visit the aggie-horticulture website at http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/newsletters/hortupdate/2007/may07/Caladiums.html.

Upcoming Events

- **2011 Wilson Garden Tour** May 6th and 7th tour some of Wilson’s local gardens on this two day event. For more information contact Cyndi Lauderdale at 252 237-0113

- **Canning College Summer Series**, May 21st through August 20th learn hands-on the “ins and outs” of jams, jellies, pickling and other methods of food preservation. Class size is limited so register early. For more information contact Debbie Stroud at 919 989-5380.

- **Rain Barrel Workshop** May 28th there are five sessions available beginning at 9:00am. For the first time this year we will offer just the barrel, kits, or the opportunity to assemble the barrels on site. For more information contact Angela Faison at 919 989-5380

- **Master Gardener Plant Sale**, May 28th from 8:30am until 12:00 noon at the Johnston County Agriculture Center. Purchase plants the Master Gardeners have propagated out of their own yards. For more information contact Shawn Banks at 919 989-5380.

Yard Villians
Plum Curculio
*Conotrachelus nenuphar*
By Shawn Banks

What a nasty little, and I do mean little, pest of fruits. This weevil as an adult is 6mm or about ¼ inch long, has a long snout that holds the antennae and the chewing mouthparts. It’s brownish-black with white and orange modeled into the coloring. This pest is a handsome devil.

I do mean devil in the worst sense of the word. If you have a peach, apple, pear, plum, or nectarine tree that is of bearing age, you will most certainly agree. The plum curculio comes out of hibernation about the time peaches are finishing flowering. The adults begin feeding on the leaves of the trees, but as soon as the shucks (outer protective covering) fall from the peaches this weevil begins feeding. The same thing happens with the other fruits as well. The feeding damage done by the weevil causing cat-faced or deformed fruits.

When the female begins laying eggs they chew a small cavity into the fruit where the egg is deposited, then the female chews a crescent shape in the skin surrounding the fruit, to protect the egg from being crushed as the fruit continues to expand and grow rapidly. When the larva hatches from the
egg, it burrows down into the fruit. In apples that don’t fall, the larva is usually crushed into the fruit as the surrounding cells expand. In peaches and nectarines, the fruit will usually drop as the larva feeds. For many home gardeners this means many small peaches and nectarines begin falling from the trees before they reach the size of a quarter or just slightly bigger.

One method of control is to pick up the fallen fruit from around the tree two or three times a week so the larva can’t crawl out of the fruit and into the soil where it pupates and emerges as an adult about five weeks later. A second method for controlling adults is to put a tarp or something under the tree and shake the tree early in the morning. The slow moving adults will drop right down onto the tap where they can be easily gathered and disposed of properly. Another control method is to spray the trees before the adult has the opportunity to begin laying eggs. Some of the chemicals recommended for controlling plum curculio from the NC Agriculture Chemicals Manual of 2011 include permethrin, indoxacarb, esfenvalerate, thiamethoxam, lambda-cyhalothrin and several others.

For more information on controlling the plum curculio, call the Cooperative Extension office at 919 989-5380.

What’s in Season?

Bell Peppers

*Capsicum annuum*

Family: Solanaceae

By Tina Stricklen

A member of the Capsicum genus, the bell pepper is a nutritious and attractive plant that any warm-weather backyard gardener can grow. Also called the sweet pepper, the fruit of this plant doesn’t pack a punch in terms of heat. Based on the Scoville Heat Unit Scale (a systematic laboratory test that indexes pepper heat levels), the bell pepper is found at the far end of the range with a zero value for pungency. The green bell pepper is actually the un-ripe version of the colored peppers. If you like the somewhat bitter taste and verdant color of these pods, picking them just before they ripen or “color up” will do the trick. If left to mature, you can expect a rainbow of colors including red, yellow, orange, purple and brown depending on your variety. Not only does the flavor enhance as they ripen but the nutritional value increases as well. They provide a high level of antioxidants and offer a high level of vitamin C, in many cases more than an average orange. There is no doubt the bell pepper is a powerhouse of nutrition as they also provide high levels of Vitamin A and E, almost the whole range of vitamin B complex, and a multitude of beneficial minerals.

Bell peppers flourish in a sunny, well-drained, loamy soil with a pH between 6.0 and 6.5. Taking a soil sample will ensure success. Varieties that perform well in our area include: Yolo Wonder, Capistrano, Bell Captain, Camelot, Hybelle, Murango and Gatorbelle. Whether you are a health nut or just a Pepper Head, the bell pepper offers something for everybody. Below is a delicious and colorful recipe utilizing orange, red and green peppers.

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Black Bean and Bell Pepper Calico Salad

- 1 can (15 ounces) black beans, rinsed thoroughly and drained
- 1 can (15 ounces) corn, rinsed thoroughly and drained
- 1 red bell pepper, seeded, de-ribbed and chopped
- 1 orange bell pepper, seeded, de-ribbed and chopped
- 1 green bell pepper, seeded, de-ribbed and chopped
- 1 medium red onion, peeled and chopped
- 2-3 cloves fresh garlic, peeled and minced
- 3 tablespoons fresh, flat-leaf (Italian) parsley, finely chopped
- 1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1/4 cup red wine vinegar
- salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

In a large bowl, combine black beans, corn, bell peppers, garlic and parsley, tossing to combine. Add olive oil and red wine vinegar, plus salt and pepper to taste. Toss again, combining well. Transfer salad to a glass serving dish that allows its gorgeous colors to take center stage. Enjoy at breakfast, brunch, lunch or dinner. Also, serve at happy hour or snack time alongside fresh tortilla chips or toasted pita chips.

MAY GARDEN TASKS

LAWN CARE

- Don't fertilize cool-season turfgrass (fescue, bluegrass). It has been growing actively all winter, and it will begin going dormant as summer heats up. Let it slow down naturally, and it’ll be better able to withstand heat and drought.
- Call for a Lawn Maintenance Calendar for your type of turf. It tells you how to care for your lawn month by month.
- Most of the weeds you see now are winter annuals. In a couple of weeks, the weather will be too hot for these winter annuals, and they will start dying. The best thing to do is mow them before they produce seed.
- Warm-season grasses such as Bermuda, Zoysia or Centipede can be planted now.
- Mow cool-season grasses, such as fescues, at a height of 3 - 3 1/2 inches to help them survive hot, dry periods.

TREES, SHRUBS & ORNAMENTALS

- Pinch your plants. Use your index finger and thumbnail to break out the lead growth at tips of branches. Pinched plants have shorter, sturdier stems, more lateral branching and more blooms. Pinch back mums, zinnia, salvia, cockscomb (celosia), petunias, marigolds, snapdragons, and garden phlox.
- It's time to plant summer beauties such as gladiolus, dahlias, caladiums and cannas and all those colorful bedding plants.
- Dead or diseased limbs on woody ornamentals should be apparent by now. Prune them out.
- Stake floppy plants, such as peonies, dahlias, and Boltonia (Michaelmas daisy), while they're small, so they’ll have support when they need it. After plants have grown large, staking can injure them.
- Cut roses properly. Leave 2-3 well developed leaves (groups of five leaflets, not three) between the cut and the main stem.
- Grow great bearded iris by giving them excellent drainage, fertile soil, sunshine, and beds free of competing weeds and grass. Divide frequently (in August) for larger and finer blooms.
- Prune spring-flowering shrubs after they bloom. The best time to prune azalea,
rhododendron, forsythia, spirea, flowering quince, kerria, pieris, and weigela is just as flowers begin to fade. To keep your shrubs ever young, prune one-third of the oldest canes back to the ground each year.

• Prune wisteria frequently throughout the summer, to control vegetative growth and get better blooms next spring.

• Keep dogwoods healthy. Spot anthracnose and powdery mildew are two major disease problems that show up on dogwood trees in late spring and summer. To help dogwoods overcome diseases: keep them watered, maintain soil fertility, and clean up fallen leaves to minimize the spread of the disease.

• Mulch! Prepare for dry summer weather and control weeds at the same time by using a layer of mulch 2-3” thick.

• Banish Bermudagrass (Wiregrass) from your planting beds. Keep it pulled to prevent it from overrunning your garden.

• Plant seeds of annual vines such as moonflower, scarlet runner beans or passionflower.

• Mix plants with the same growing requirements in your container gardens. Do not mix sun-loving and shade-loving plants together in the same container.

slug feast the previous night. Slugs hide under objects during the day.

• Train and support tomatoes, pole beans, peppers and eggplants.

• Side dress sweet corn when it is knee-high

• Make consecutive plantings of beans over a few weeks to extend your harvest.

**LANDSCAPE IDEAS**

• Plant vegetables in your flowerbeds! Eggplant, pepper varieties, and cherry tomatoes make colorful additions to the garden. Bush beans and climbing beans have attractive foliage and charming small flowers. Vegetables can also mingle with flowers in pots on a patio or deck.

• Welcome back hummingbirds! Females will be in the area first; the males will follow soon. Salvia, honeysuckles, penstemons, and other tube-shaped flowers, especially red ones, will attract hummingbirds to your garden. Fill feeders with a solution of 1 part sugar in 4 parts water. Wash feeders and replace the food at least twice a week.

**VEGETABLES & FRUITS**

• Plant veggies now that the soil is warm and the danger of frost is past. Sow seeds of beans, squash, cucumbers, and corn. Set out transplants of tomatoes, peppers, eggplant and okra.

• Pinching also works well for many vegetable plants, including tomatoes and peppers.

• Watch for slugs. These soft, slimy, slender pests have a special taste for tender young crops. Holes in leaves or on the leaf margins and a silvery slime trail indicate a