

NEW YEARS GARDENING RESOLUTIONS

By Ralph E. Mitchell

We all need to look towards the future for personal improvement and goal setting. The backyard gardener should be no different and the New Year is a great time to make some resolutions that will benefit any landscape. Let's look at some tips, techniques, and strategies that will make your horticultural experience in Southwest Florida the best in 2008.

Your first resolution should be to water properly. As we continue to face a drought in 2008, it is crucial to follow local watering restrictions and implement common-sense watering practices in your landscapes.

- Design and maintain a yard that thrives predominantly on rainfall once plants are established.
- Water your lawn and other plants only when they show signs of stress. (Comply with any existing watering restrictions in your community.)
- Calibrate your sprinkler(s) to apply ½ to ¾ inch of water per application.
- Mow lawns high to encourage a deeper, more draught and pest tolerant root system. A higher cut also shades out weeds. Cut no more than ⅓ the height of grass blades with each mowing.
- Put a rain gauge in your yard to track rainfall to avoid unnecessary watering.
- Use a drip or micro-spray irrigation system to more efficiently water plant and flower beds. Let our Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program (FYN) help you with this!

Secondly, feed your palms correctly. Nutritional deficiencies not only lead to

unthrifty looking plants, but may also to the eventual death of the palm. This may be especially true of introduced palms that may not like our alkaline soils. Color and leaf condition will tell the story of your palm's health. Light leaf color may mean the need for nitrogen. Yellowing or orange spots may indicate a need for potassium. A lack of manganese will cause "frizzle-top" where the leaves are withered and appear scorched. Our soils are often so high in pH that this nutrient may have difficulty becoming available to the plant. Cold temperatures may even reduce the uptake of Mn. All of these nutrients must be provided in proper balance for good growth and healthy plants. Now, while it is true that certain severe nutritional deficiencies may need to be corrected with the element that is missing (manganese sulfate for manganese deficiency for example), a complete "palm special" fertilizer in a slow-release formula is the best maintenance fertilizer to use on a regular basis as per the label instructions. Apply the fertilizer in a broadcast method and not up against the trunk or in thick bands.

Next, make sure to prune your palms responsibly. Palms need to retain all of their good, functional leaves. These leaves are the "solar panels" of the palm and food making devices needed to keep the plant alive. Premature removal of good fronds unnecessarily weakens these plants which may predispose them to secondary problems. What are some acceptable reasons for pruning a palm? Removing dead fronds makes the palm look better and improves the overall appearance of the landscape. Dead fronds which are loosely attached to the palm may fall and injury people or damage property. These need to be removed to reduce this hazard. Removing flower/fruit clusters is also fine. This debris can be messy and also potentially hazardous. This removal also

reduces the number of weedy palm seedlings that could sprout up around the base. Over pruning can be detrimental to a palm. "Hurricane cuts", as they are called, stresses the palm to a point where there is an increased chance of disease and insect invasion. New fronds take time to emerge and thus should be protected and preserved. Your goal - remove only dead, brown fronds.

Next, resolve to plant the "right plant, in the right place". Sensible selection of plant materials based on some knowledge of the plant is always best. For example, a shade-loving plant will not do well in a full-sun site. A plant that requires a somewhat drier environment may rot in a site regularly watered to excess. A tree that may grow up to 60-feet tall and over 100 feet wide would not be a good choice planted next to a house. Consider using native plants as well. Get to know your plant materials and analyze your site before you plant. Again, let our Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program (FYN) help you with this!

In 2008 you will use pesticides properly!

Key to the proper use of a pesticide is making sure to **READ THE LABEL, THE LABEL IS THE LAW!** The pesticide label is a legal document that must be followed to the letter. The label gives you a wealth of information such as which pests it will control, what hosts it can be applied to, how to mix the chemical, when it should be applied, how much and how often and how to protect yourself and the environment. Each label will contain a **Signal Word** that will call attention to the degree of toxicity of each individual pesticide. For instance, a **Caution** label indicates that it is slightly toxic. A **Warning** signal word will indicate a pesticide that is moderately toxic, while a **Danger** label will warn of a severely toxic material. The word **Danger** with the word **Poison** and a skull and crossbones is even more hazardous and is highly toxic. For a home garden, stick to materials with

Caution labels to help minimize safety issues or use suggested non-toxic cultural controls.

The last resolution that I would like you to ponder for 2008 is to get to know your bugs, especially good bugs.

Good bugs can also be called beneficial insects. Beneficial bugs are all around us and help maintain the balance of nature as it relates to insect pests in and around our landscape. A lady beetle eating an aphid is an example of this. These insects are generally orange with black spots but may also appear in shades of brown, red or black with or without spots. The larvae look like a miniature alligators with a scaly, elongated form in black and orange. Both adults and larvae will eat aphids, scale insects, mealybugs, whiteflies, and mites. Another beneficial insect is known as the lacewing. In both brown and green forms, this insect produces a larva built for killing and eating aphids and the like. Large pincher mouthparts grab prey and suck fluids from them. An additional interesting beneficial predator is the flower fly. Looking like a honeybee, these insects produce a maggot-like larva with a great appetite for aphids. Three important true bugs that are great predators are the big-eyed bug, minute pirate bug, and soldier bug. These insects attack, pierce and suck the fluids out of pests such as thrips, caterpillars, mites and leafhoppers. Tiny parasitic wasps are also our friends. You may have seen a sick-looking caterpillar with cocoons hanging from it. This is a sign of the wasp's work and it should not be disturbed. Parasitic flies do similar work. Our office can help you identify good and bad bugs. Let our office help you identify your insects.

Are you ready for 2008? Let the Charlotte County Extension Service help you with all of your horticultural educational needs.

For more information on all types of gardening subjects, please contact our Master Gardeners on the Plant Lifeline at 941.764.4340 from 1:00pm-4:00pm Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Our office is located at 25550 Harbor View Road, Suite 3, in Port Charlotte. Our **Plant Clinics** are available across the county:

- **Englewood/Charlotte Public Library** Thursdays 10:00am-1:00pm.
- **Mid-County Regional Library** 1st and 3rd Thursday of month 1:00pm-3:00pm.
- **Edison College Learning Resources Library** 3rd Tuesday of month 1:00pm-4:00pm.
- **South Gulf Cove Learning Garden** 3rd Wednesday of month 9:00am-12:00pm.

Monthly **Plant Clinics** are Saturdays 9:00am-12:00pm at the following locations:

- **Peachland Promenades Publix** - 2nd Saturday of month.
- **Home Depot Murdock & Home Depot Punta Gorda** - 3rd Saturday of month.

Ralph Mitchell is the County Extension Director/Horticulture Agent for the Charlotte County Cooperative Extension Service. You may contact him by email (Ralph.Mitchell@charlottefl.com). You may also contact a volunteer Master Gardener 1:00pm-4:00pm Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 941.764.4340 or by email (Master.Gardener@charlottefl.com).

For more information about our Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program, please contact our FYN Horticulture Program Assistant, Allison Steele, at 941.764.4340. Allison can help educate you about the Florida Yards & Neighborhoods Program so that you can create a beautiful, Florida-Friendly landscape that saves you time and money while conserving precious water resources and reducing pollution.

Resource:

Smith, H.A. & Capinera, J.L. (2000) Natural Enemies and Biological Control, University of Florida/IFAS Cooperative Extension Service.

Gilman, E.F. & Eisner, N.J. (2002) Pruning Palms, University of Florida/IFAS Cooperative Extension Service.

Worden, E.C., Broschat, T.K. & Yurgalevitch (2002) Care and Maintenance of Landscape Palms in South Florida, University of Florida/IFAS Cooperative Extension Service.

(2007) A Guide to Florida- Friendly Landscaping: Florida Yards and Neighborhood Handbook. University of Florida/IFAS Extension Service.

Broschat, T.K. (2000) Palm Nutrition Guide, University of Florida/IFAS Cooperative Extension Service.

Trenholm, L.E. (2004) Homeowner Best Management Practices for the Home Lawn. University of Florida/IFAS Extension Service.

Nesheim, O.N. (2002) Homeowners' Guide to Pesticide Safety. University of Florida/IFAS Extension Service.