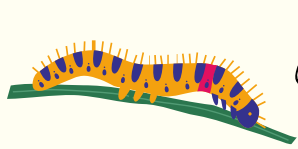


THE GARDEN BENCH

The Manatee County Master Gardener E-Newsletter

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Cosmic Florida Caterpillars

By Maureen Hirthler, Master Gardener Volunteer



Do not be afraid when you see these caterpillars in your Florida garden. They may look like something from another planet, but they are on their way to becoming beautiful moths.



Here is the black-blotched caterpillar (*Schizura leptinoides*) looking like an armored tank. It feeds on the leaves of hardwood trees such as hickory, oak, and maple.



Nason's slug caterpillar (*Natada nasoni*) resembles a cactus. It also likes hardwood trees.



Those in north and central Florida often see tussock caterpillars, including the definite tussock moth (*Orgyia deficiente*). Oak trees are their favorite habitat, but they also enjoy landscape shrubs and small trees. These seem to have some riders aboard!



The flannel moth caterpillar, *Megalopyge opercularis*, is considered one of the most venomous caterpillars in North America. It feeds on scrubby deciduous shade trees such as oaks, elms, maples and citrus, or on small bushes. The "hairs" of these caterpillars can break off and cause itching but also hide an unpleasant surprise: sharp spines. The spines are connected to venom gland cells, and the pain from injected venom is said to be intense, lasting at least 12 hours.



"Aggie" the Agriculture and Extension Service's Native Green Tree Frog

Drop by our office at 1303 17th Street West, Palmetto, and you can meet Aggie, the green tree frog (*Hyla cinerea*), hanging out in its terrarium in the lobby. Shy and nocturnal, *H. cinerea* varies from gray green to bright green (depending on habitat) and usually sports a light stripe down each side. It needs water nearby. We feed Aggie baby crickets.

For more information on the native green tree frogs visit:
<https://www.floridamuseum.ufl.edu/discover-herps/florida-frog-calls/green-treefrog/>



Our last caterpillar is truly out-of-this-world. The monkey slug (*Phobetron pithecium*) feeds on trees and shrubs, such as apple, ash, birch, cherry, chestnut, dogwood, hickory, oak, persimmon, walnut, and willow. The adult, called the hag moth, looks like it has tassels for eyes!

Look closely at your landscape and see if you notice any of these cosmic caterpillars.

Resources for more information:
<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/IN014>
<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/entity/topic/caterpillars>



"Aggie" the native green tree frog



Ask a Master Gardener

By Karen Holleran, Master Gardener Volunteer



Ask a MGV Submission

Damaged hardwood tree

Q: Can you tell me what disease this is and how I can treat it?

A: This much damage to the bark of a hardwood tree is often fatal to the tree since the cambium layer that feeds the tree is destroyed. This kind of damage is more often caused by mechanical injury than a disease. String trimmers, mowers, or irrigation water hitting the tree bark causing erosion is often the culprit. Secondary infections and insect infestation can happen in the damaged area. Although a hardwood tree can compartmentalize a wound by sealing it off, this wound is too large to heal. The tree will suffer the consequences as appears to be happening by the dead canopy. I don't believe there is any hope of saving this tree.

This link provides information about damage to hardwood trees for your reference.

<https://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/woody/lower-trunk.shtml>

Master Gardener Karen Holleran answers you email questions and looks at photos for identification of problems at ManateeMG@gmail.com. Or visit our Plant Diagnostic Clinic Monday through Friday (closed Wednesdays) from 9:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M. at 1303 17th St. W., Palmetto, FL. Or call us during office hours at 941-722-4524 and ask for a Master Gardener.

Educational Gardens Showcase!



A Boohaker

MGVs working in the garden



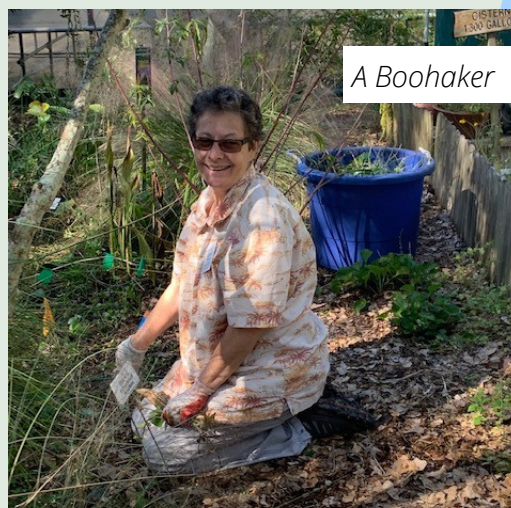
K Granberg

Wetlands Demo



K Granberg

Barbara Davis Educational Gardens



A Boohaker

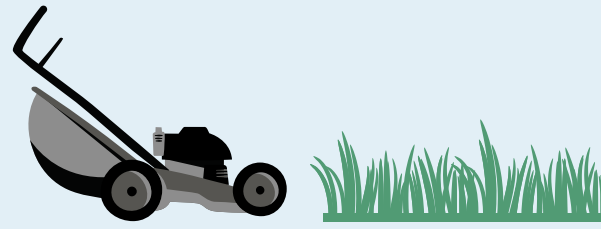
MGV working in the garden

Manatee County Master Gardener Volunteers (MGV) have created a fabulous demonstration of native plants and wildflowers on the Extension grounds. Located at 1303 17th Street West, the Barbara Davis Educational Garden is open to the public (when accompanied by an MGV) every weekday except Wednesday. Vegetable, Children's, Fruit Tree, Butterfly, and other specialty gardens are featured; the wildflower garden is located around the sundial and is headed up by MGV Amy Boohaker. Her team is dedicated to educating home gardeners on the benefits of installing native wildflowers to support pollinators and enhance the beauty of home landscapes. In addition, Amy heads up the wetlands garden (where most of these photos were taken).

For more information go to <https://gardeningsolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/plants/ornamentals/wildflowers-for-all-seasons.html> and <https://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/lawn-and-garden/florida-water-gardens/>.

FREEDOM LAWNS

By Jennifer Tonge-Martin, Master Gardener Volunteer



Lawns! Love them or hate them, most of us (especially if living in an HOA) are stuck with them. A home surrounded by an expanse of cool, calm green is enchanting to look at but a burden to maintain.

Though a properly managed lawn is “Florida Friendly,” the turf grasses we typically grow for year-round green lawns must be fertilized, irrigated, and protected from pests and diseases, not to mention frequently mown. Is it any wonder that a lot of frustrated homeowners ask “Why can’t I just dig it all up and put down rocks!?”

Here at the Manatee County Extension office, Master Gardeners Volunteers field lawn questions all the time. We hold many classes for the homeowner; certification programs are held here for professionals as well. We hope everyone takes advantage of this education and support before going the “give up and get rocks” route.

There is another alternative that many of us have embraced, dubbed the “Freedom Lawn.” Naturalist Ginny Stibolt has written about and promoted a smaller, sustainable lawn in her book *Sustainable Gardening for Florida*, a tremendous resource for Florida gardeners. The “Freedom Lawn” is basically a random mix of low-growing groundcovers and grassy plants (or “weeds”) that are hardy enough to withstand regular mowing and foot traffic, whilst requiring much less (if any) fertilizing, watering, and pest control than a lawn made of a single turf grass type. When mowed, this “Freedom Lawn” gives that desired restful patch of green that complements other plantings and our homes, without the hassles of a conventional lawn.

Most of the development of a “Freedom Lawn” is accidental: did a fungal infection decimate some of your St. Augustine grass? Let Bermuda and crabgrass grow there and just keep mowing. Stop putting down weed killers and let some pretty wildflowers sprout (and just keep mowing). Regular mowing to keep the lawn neat and prevent excessive seed-heads is the main care requirement. Irrigation is decreased or may not even be necessary. As some plants die back or go dormant, others will take their place. Fertilizing is not needed, but a little compost or composted manure may be spread lightly in the fall as “top dressing.”

So relax, freedom lovers! We can have our lawns and enjoy them too, if we do it the easy, Florida Friendly way!

For a profile of Ginny Stibolt, visit: <https://blogs.ifas.ufl.edu/extension/2018/09/07/gardening-for-a-changing-climate/>



IS DOORYARD CITRUS FOR YOU?

by Kathy Oliver, Program Assistant

Florida and citrus go hand-in-hand. While commercial citrus production has dropped considerably, it is still a major industry in the state. As such, a high priority of University of Florida's research efforts is finding solutions to Huanglongbing disease (HLB), also known as citrus greening. This serious bacterial disease, transmitted by the Asian citrus psyllid, makes citrus unproductive and leads to decline and death of trees. Research into disease tolerant varieties and best management practices benefits commercial producers and home citrus growers as well. UF's effort to educate residents about citrus cultivation is called the Dooryard Citrus Initiative.



Sugar Belle Mandariin

When purchasing plants, look for a certified citrus nursery that is open to the public. Certified nurseries are required to take precautions to minimize exposure of young trees to HLB. Each plant will be labeled with the type of rootstock and scion (the productive portion above the graft). Home gardeners should take care to choose citrus varieties adapted to their locations. Newly developed rootstocks have shown greater tolerance to HLB and may address other cultural issues such as salt tolerance, cold hardiness, and nematode resistance. Talking with a knowledgeable nursery grower will aid in selection.

Citrus greening is widespread in Florida, and no citrus variety is completely resistant. There are, however, some varieties that are tolerant, meaning they can come down with the disease but continue to produce. One is the Sugar Belle Mandarin, a hybrid of Sweet Clementine and Minneola, and it is cold hardy to 14 degrees. This variety is comparable to the ever popular and delicious Minneola Honeybell. The newest tolerant variety, called OLL-4, is similar to the Valencia orange. It has good flavor, produces February-June, and can withstand temperature to 28 degrees. Of the acid citrus varieties, traditional lemons and the unusual finger lime tend to be more HLB tolerant than others. Trees should be planted in spring or early fall. Consider protecting your young tree with an individual protective cover (IPC). These specialized tree covers have small mesh to exclude insects while letting in sunlight. Do not prune citrus trees for the first three years. When your tree is ready for pruning, do so after the tree has finished producing and only in dry weather. Lateral or horizontal branches are best for fruit production. Remove any non-productive vertical shoots and sprouts below the graft. Sanitize your pruning tools with alcohol before moving to the next tree.

The ideal soil pH for citrus is slightly acid, ranging from 6.0-6.5. Trees grown in alkaline soil (pH >7) are more susceptible to HLB and micronutrient deficiencies. Amending soils with organic matter can help moderate high pH soils and improve soil structure. Make sure that nutrients are available year-round by applying six- or twelve-month controlled-release fertilizers with micronutrients (manganese, zinc, iron, boron, etc.) included. Micronutrients may also be applied through nutritional sprays on the leaves.

If you are unsure when to water, check out the Citrus Irrigation Scheduler on the Florida Automated Weather Service (FAWN). You can customize it for your own micro-irrigation system and generate a schedule based on various parameters, including the weather. (There is also an Urban Irrigation Scheduler for your landscape.) With close attention to plant selection and cultural practices, dooryard citrus is an option for homeowners.

Resources:

Dooryard Citrus Initiative <https://crec.ifas.ufl.edu/homeowner-education/dooryard-citrus-initiative/>

Citrus Tree Care for the Home Gardener in the HLB Era <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdf%5CPP%5CPP33600.pdf>

Niche Market and Dooryard Citrus for the HLB World

https://crec.ifas.ufl.edu/media/crecifasufledu/extension/extension-publications/2019/2019_december_niche.pdf



Worm Castings aka Black Gold

By Nancy Hammer, Master Gardener Volunteer

Are you looking to reduce household kitchen waste that might otherwise end up down your drain or in the local landfill? Are you looking for valuable amendments for your garden and potting soil? Would you like to compost fruit and veggie scraps, but do not have enough space for a regular compost pile? Do you want some low maintenance pets? Then vermiculture, commonly known as worm composting may be the ticket.

Worm compost consists of worm castings (worm poop), which gardeners sometimes refer to as black gold. This soil amendment is full of beneficial microbes, improves soil structure, and increases nutrient and water availability in our sandy soils.

The basic ingredients for creating worm compost are a container referred to as a worm bin, composting worms, kitchen scraps, and bedding. Worm bins with multiple trays can be purchased online, and we sell them at the Manatee County Extension offices. Or you can make one using plastic containers (multiple sites have instructions and YouTube tutorials abound). If the bin is outside, it should be kept in a covered and shaded area such as a porch, so the worms do not get too hot or drown in the Florida summer sun and torrential rain. Composting worms are happiest when it is 60-85 degrees, but they are pretty hardy. Properly managed bins can also be kept inside.



Worm compost

The proper species of worms is important. Do not dig up earthworms from your yard or buy earthworms in bait shops. Regular earthworms are not suitable for worm bins as they live deep in the soil. Red wigglers (*Eisenia fetida*) are surface dwellers sometimes found in leaf litter and acclimate well to shallow worm bin trays. They can easily be ordered online from vermiculture suppliers.

Red wigglers are basically vegans. Most veggie and fruit scraps are suitable, but avoid citrus, onions, hot peppers, and papaya seeds. Meat, dairy, and oils are verboten as they will stink and possibly create dangerous pathogens. Like birds, the wigglers have gizzards and need grit such as crushed eggshells, or rock dust for digestion. They do not have teeth...thankfully.



Compost bin

In addition to food, the worms need moist bedding such as shredded newspaper and cardboard which they will also consume and turn into castings. Coconut coir is another option.

There are several ways to harvest worm castings from a multiple tray-based bin while disturbing your worm pets as little as possible. One way involves the worms separating themselves from the compost by crawling up through holes into the tray above baited with fresh kitchen scraps and bedding.

For more information

<https://blogs.ifas.ufl.edu/manateeco/2017/12/29/vermicomposting-serious-gardeners-hobby/>

March Calendar of Events

Date	Time	Event
Wednesday 3/2/22 & Saturday 3/5/22	8:00AM	Mushroom ID Hikes Join UF/IFAS for an engaging walk into the fantastic world of fungi on a tour through one of our local natural areas. These walks will focus on practicing skills needed for identification of local mushroom species as well as on the broader ecology associated. Be prepared to walk a long distance. Appropriate footwear, hat, sunscreen etc. are required. https://www.eventbrite.com/e/mushroom-id-hike-tickets-267831179267
Friday 3/4/22	10:00AM	Gardening 101: 5 Easy Herbs Join UF/IFAS Extension Manatee County to learn about five easy herbs for beginners to propagate and grow. Florida's climate and soils can be challenging, but these herbs will set you up for gardening and culinary success. https://www.eventbrite.com/e/gardening-101-5-easy-herbs-tickets-258132319717
Friday 3/18/22	9:30AM	Gardening with Mushrooms Join UF/IFAS Extension Manatee County for a conversation about using mushrooms to enhance your gardens. Not always nefarious, fungi in the garden can be used to help build soil, process compost and support plant health. https://ufl.pacecommunity.net/Event/ViewEventProfile?eventId=21356

University of Florida IFAS Extension - Manatee County

1303 17th St. W., Palmetto, FL 34221

Telephone: (941) 722-4524

Website: <http://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/manatee/> **Email:** ManateeMG@gmail.com

Master Gardener Volunteer Amy Stripe & Joy Dersken, Co-Editors
Contents reviewed & edited by Alyssa Vinson, Extension Agent

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