

Late Summer, Hot Weather Gardening Tips

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Horry County, Conway, SC — August 11, 2008

With the heat and spotty rainfall we have seen this summer, many gardeners may find their landscapes looking a little ragged. Although the hot temperatures of summer usually begin to wane during the end of August, there is still plenty of summer left. It is not uncommon for temperatures to be well into the 90s throughout the late summer and early fall. This means August and September can be rather uncomfortable in the landscape to humans as well as plants.

Plants that survived the summer, especially those not well taken care of, may be showing signs of stress. Bedding plants and plants not adapted to our area will usually show more heat stress than those native plants that have been well managed. These stressed plants will be weakened and prone to insect and disease problems. To help your plants make it through the last of the heat this year, be on the lookout for pests such as: aphids, lace bugs, chinch bugs, spider mites, whiteflies and mole crickets.

Although any of these insects can cause late season damage, be especially on the lookout for whiteflies and spider mites. Whiteflies, as their name implies, are small white insects about the size of a large gnat. When shaken, a heavily infested plant will have numerous whiteflies flying up looking as if the plant has dandruff. Of course dandruff would probably be easier to control than the whiteflies.

Whiteflies feed on the plant by sucking the sap from the leaves. As they do, they will leave a sticky residue that will encourage the growth of a black sooty mold. The appearance of this sooty mold is a good indication that an insect is feeding on the plant. However, this sticky residue promoting the sooty mold can be caused by insects other than whiteflies including aphids and scales.

Whiteflies are often selective in what they feed on. They will often infest gardenias, hibiscus, lantana as well as many bedding plants. They can be difficult to control once they become established in a landscape so sanitation and avoidance are important. Treat infested plants with a labeled insecticide that will not cause damage to your plant by treating during the summer heat. Read and follow all label directions to avoid chemical damage. Systemic insecticides may also be used in conjunction with foliar sprays for whitefly control. Also effective once temperatures have cooled is dormant or horticultural oil.

Spider mites, like whiteflies, feed on the sap of plant leaves. However, they do not exude a sticky sap but cause the leave of your plants to bleach out. During heavy infestations, webs can be seen covering the plants and may even droop from plant to plant. To identify a spider mite problem, use a hand lens to inspect the underside of the leaf or beat an infected leaf on a piece of white paper. The spider mites will be seen moving about the paper and will be the size of ground pepper. To control spider mites, use several applications of an insecticidal soap or a labeled miticide.

Getting away from insect problems, many of our flower beds may look in disarray after the summer heat. You may want to replant your beds with new material to get you through the rest of the summer and into fall. To replant your beds, remove the old plant material and add them to your compost pile. Be sure to avoid adding weeds with seed heads present as this could cause the spread of certain weeds. Kill any hard to control weeds in your beds, such as bermudagrass or torpedograss, using a nonselective herbicide. Refresh your beds with new compost and plant using well established, high quality plants. This is not the time of year to be nursing back sick plants.

When planting, be sure the plants are planted at the proper depth. Do not plant too deep. This could inhibit root development and encourage root rot. Carefully tickle apart the root system once the plant is out of the pot to discourage circular roots. Be gentle as you do not want to place undue stress on the plant this time of year. After planting, lightly mulch your beds and water as needed.

There are several plants that can be placed in the landscape this time of year. For sunny areas consider: periwinkle, pentas, verbenas, salvia, lantana, zinnia, marigold and cosmos. For shady areas consider: impatiens, begonias and coleus.