Summer Gardening Questions, August 5-11

Q: There are many small dead branches in my Bradford pear. What is causing it and what can I do about it?

A: That's fireblight, a common bacterial disease that affects members of the rose family. It's spread by splashing water and wet springs exacerbate it. Unfortunately, there's no cure for it other than planting blight resistant cultivars. Most ornamental cultivars of *Pyrus calleryana* have moderate to good resistance along with most hard canning pears. Soft European pears like 'Bartlett' are highly susceptible and will generally die from severe fireblight infection. Pruning, fertilizing, and overhead watering all encourage fireblight and should be avoided.

Q: It's so hot. I water my lawn three times a week. Is that enough?

A: It's more than enough. In fact, it's too often. Lawns should be watered manually only once a week (when it doesn't rain), one to one and a half inches at a time. This can be measured using tuna cans, baby food jars, or any other containers to find out how long it takes to catch an inch or more. Watering frequently in limited amounts leads to shallow roots and increased disease susceptibility. Deep watering creates deep roots and leads to increased drought tolerance.

Q: The needles on my pines are turning brown and falling off. What gives?

A: It's perfectly normal for pine trees to drop their inner needles during late summer. It's a natural occurrence to be expected annually.

Q: Are there any flowers that can tolerate this searing heat? My petunias, geraniums, and zinnias are all dying.

A: Duranta, esperanza, firebush, lantana, Mexican heather, ornamental sweet potatoes, pentas, periwinkles, plumbago, purslane, thryallis, and tropical milkweed can all tolerate 100-degree temperatures.

Q: Why are all the oak trees dying? Is it a disease?

A: The far majority of the dead and dying oaks in East Texas are the result of the 2021 devastating freeze. Many that suffered partial freeze damage died in the 2022 drought. This injury was primarily on live oaks, post oaks, Southern red oaks, and water oaks. Live oak damage was the result of genetics and provenance since they are a coastal tree. The others were the result of not being hardened off (preconditioned) for such cold temperatures. Plants do not like drastic changes in temperatures. Unfortunately, there is nothing to do about it other than having them removed and replacing them with new trees in the fall.

Q: Is it true that watering during the heat of day will scorch and kill plants?

A: No. This is a common wives'/husbands' tale. If a plant is dry and wilted it should be watered, no matter what time of day or what temperature it is. Just make sure and run water through the hose first so it doesn't come out boiling! It doesn't hurt plants to be slightly wilted before being irrigated. Just make sure to water them thoroughly by saturating the entire root zone.

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Chilli Thrips, August 12-18

As an extension agent, most of the time questions I receive at the office are usually predictable and common questions we see time and time again. In fact, you can usually guess what questions the office is receiving depending on the time of year. Ponds in the summer, what to plant in the spring, dead trees during a drought, etc. The questions can even become mundane at times. This was not the case the other week when a homeowner dropped off samples of azalea, hibiscus, and angel trumpet that were sick from an unknown cause. The symptoms were leaves not developing properly and appeared to be stunted or deformed. I was thinking the issue was herbicide damage or environmental, but that was ruled out after talking with the homeowner. I was truly stumped and had to solicit the help of other extension agents.

The culprit was chilli thrips, *Scirtothrips dorsalis*. Come to find out chilli thrips are a common and economically important pest of tropical ornamentals in southeast Asia, Africa, and Oceania. Chilli thrips have spread to suitable climates around the world as an introduced insect pest. And are quickly becoming established in the United States, especially Florida and Texas. Chilli thrips belong to the order of insects called Thysanoptera which include over 7,700 species. Thrips are known for being incredibly small, nearly microscopic, slender insects with fringed wings. They are considered very weak flyers. Most thrips species do not pose any threat to crops or other economically important plants. However, a small number of species, like the chilli thrips, are considered a serious pest.

Chilli thrips are less than 2mm in length and adults are pale in color with black wings and dark spots forming incomplete strips on the abdomen. ID is difficult and identification is usually

the result of knowing the behavior and damage chilli thrips can cause. Chilli thrips feed on foliage while many native thrips feed on flowers. Chilli thrips are typically found on the underside of leaves near the mid-vein. Host plants include over 225 species including members of the bean family and other important crops like corn, cotton, eggplant, melon, peanut, pepper, rose, strawberry, tobacco, and tomato. Chilli thrips also like to feed on a variety of ornamentals and the list of species impacted is growing.

Chilli thrips use both piercing and sucking mouthparts to literally suck the life out of plants. These tiny insects use their mouth to penetrate individual plant cells and then extract the material from the cells. This feeding activity results in bronzing or dead spots on leaves, curled leaves, or leaves dropping from the plant. Plants that are infested will show signs of being stunted or dwarfed, also known as witches brooming. If this damage wasn't enough chilli thrips are vectors for plant viruses including melon yellow spot virus, leaf curl virus and peanut necrosis virus to name a few.

Early detection is key to prevent large infestations. Be on the lookout for bronzing leaves, deformed leaves, or any other signs that could be mistaken for herbicide damage. You can use a hand lens to help ID thrips if you suspect they are present. Insecticides can be used to control populations; many products are labeled to control thrips. Products containing the active ingredient imidacloprid can be used as a soil drench or foliar spray and is preferred as it will provide longer control and has minimal impact on natural predators of thrips including pirate bugs, lacewings, and predatory mites. If you have tropical ornamentals or grow host crops of chilli thrips you need to be on the lookout for this expanding introduced pest that can be found in Polk County.

Adult chilli thrips, Image Credit: USDA-APHIS

Chilli thrips damage on azalea. Deformed leaves resemble herbicide damage.

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Grasshoppers!, August 19-25

There are about 150 species of grasshoppers in the state of Texas, but 90% of the damage to crops, gardens, trees, and pastures is caused by just 5 species.

Grasshoppers deposit their eggs 1/2 to 2 inches below the soil surface in pod-like structures. Each egg pod consists of 20 to 120 eggs. Egg pods are very resistant to cold and can

easily survive the winter if the soil is not disturbed. Grasshoppers deposit eggs in fallow fields, ditches, fencerows, and weedy areas, as well as in crop fields and hay fields.

Eggs begin hatching in late April or early May; hatching peaks about mid-June. If spring weather is cool and dry, hatching may be delayed until July. Young grasshoppers are called nymphs. They look like adults, but are smaller and do not have wings. Nymphs go through 5 to 6 developmental stages and become adults in 40 to 60 days, depending on weather and food supplies.

The adult grasshoppers deposit eggs from late July through the fall. Usually only one generation of grasshoppers is produced each year.

Producers should start watching for grasshoppers early in the season and begin control measures while grasshoppers are still nymphs. Smaller grasshoppers are more susceptible to insecticides than larger ones.

CONTROL OPTIONS:

Cultural Control: Controlling summer weeds reduces available feed for newly hatching nymphs as well as making it easier for birds to prey on grasshoppers.

Chemical Control: Grasshoppers are susceptible to many insecticides. The length of control will depend on the residual activity of the insecticides and the frequency of treatment. Controlling grasshoppers over a large area will reduce the numbers present which can re-infest a treated area. Remember, smaller grasshoppers are more susceptible to insecticides than larger ones.

Insecticides that can be used on pastures and hayfields:

ALWAYS READ AND FOLLOW ALL LABEL INSTRUCTIONS ON PESTICIDES!

Mustang Max (9.6% zeta-cypermethrin)

Karate Z (lambda cyhalothrin): Do not harvest for hay until 7 days after application

Baythroid XL (beta-cyfluthrin)

Dimilin 2L: Dimilin must be applied when grasshoppers are about 1/4 inch. Dimilin is not effective on adults. (generics now available)

Sevin 4F, Sevin XLR, Sevin 80S, generic Carbaryl: 14 day waiting period before grazing or harvesting

Tombstone Helios (cyfluthrin)

Multiple products (examples include Lambda-Cy, Grizzly Z, Kendo, etc.; lambda-cyhalothrin)

Vantacor (chlorantraniliprole): For optimum control, apply to nymphs.

Coragen (chlorantraniliprole)

Besiege (chlorantraniliprole + lambda-cyhalothrin): labeled for grasshoppers and armyworms**.**

Grasshoppers resting on a weed

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Live Oak Sucker Growth, August 26-September 1

Live oak trees make a great addition to any yard or neighbor because they are long lived, semi-evergreen, grow too large sizes, produce plentifully shade, and hardy. For these reasons live oaks are found throughout yards and subdivisions in the eastern half of Texas. However, there is one characteristic of live oaks that can become a nuisance and eye sore to many homeowners. Live oak sucker growth is when a tree will sprout an abundance of new trees or sucker growths from the root system. Depending on the severity, hundreds of new growths can be found around the base of the tree.

Instead of relying solely on seeds to germinate and continue the species sucker growths allow live oaks trees to have additionally methods to propagate and spread. Sucker growths play an important role in certain regions of the state, such as in central Texas, where oak trees form motts and become the dominate species. These sucker growths allow the parent tree to form motts and which most of the individual trees are clones. Understanding that sucker growths originate from roots of the parent tree and have a direct connection through the root system to the parent tree is a very important consideration when determining management options. There is also a great deal of variability in sucker growth from tree to tree. Some live oak trees will produce not one sucker growth while other will produce thousands in their lifetime. The correlation between why certain trees are prone to sucker growth is not well understood. Tree nurseries have selected for live oaks that are not prone to sucker growth, thus when planting a tree, you should purchase seedlings from a nursey and not transplant seedlings from your neighbors' pasture.

Unfortunately, management options are limited for live oak sucker growth. One of the first steps many homeowners want to do is apply an herbicide to the suckers, however this should never be done! Since the suckers are directly attached to the root system of your parent tree any herbicide application stands a high chance of causing damage to the parent tree. Another management option many homeowners attempt is to suffocate the suckers by mowing and then covering with either landscaping plastic, gravel, or mulch. Covering will cause short term success, however the suckers will not die since they are still attached to the parent tree and will eventually poke thorough. There are only three realistic management options and none are very good. The first is to cut down the parent live oak and replace with a new live oak that will hopefully produce less sucker growths. The second is to routinely mow the sucker growths. This option will not get rid of the suckers but will make them less noticeable. The third option is to learn to live with live oak sucker growths.

Live oak sucker growths can be very unappealing in a yard or landscape. These sucker growths can be a thorn in a side to some homeowners and they will attempt just about everything under the sun to get rid of them. Unfortunately, management options are limited, and homeowners have three options kill the parent tree, mow regularly, or just get used to the eyesore.

Live oak sucker growth, image credit: LSU AG Center

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