

Horticulture Hints
November 2019

Most of the summer flowers are fading, many annuals have lived out their short but intense lives and are cashing in their chips. Time to gear up for our cooler weather. And it appears to finally be here! Tropical Storm Nestor did its worst, and we appear to have survived unscathed. Our thoughts and prayers, however, with those just south of us who experienced the tornadoes. Damage was definitely done there. Hopefully, the rest of hurricane season will be uneventful.

For some reason, the pipevine swallowtail butterflies (*Battus philenor*) left my pipevine alone most of the summer. Which allowed me to enjoy a number of the flowers unique to the *Aristolochia* genus. The larvae of this particular butterfly eat exclusively on members of the genus. All that came to a rather sudden end when one mother-to-be found my hidden vine. I counted at least sixteen caterpillars munching away, 'dropping' leaf litter and 'droppings' in their wake. Attached you will see 'before' and 'after'. Actually, they should be labelled 'before' and 'during', since they aren't finished munching. I do believe they're about done, though, as I found one caterpillar sitting very still (as in "not eating") on a nearby length of stink vine. I think it's getting ready to pupate. This bit of stink vine gets a reprieve. For now. Until our little caterpillar becomes an adult. Then it's off with its head. The stink vine that is, not the butterfly.

On the weed front, chickweed (*Stellaria media*, which means 'little star in the mist') is starting to grow and thrive since it has cooled off a little. Chickweed is a broad-leafed annual that can produce several generations within the period of a year. And each plant can produce up to 2,500 seeds from those tiny, white, five-petaled flowers. This little rascal, it seems, originated in Eurasia, and has now spread to most of the world. It doesn't like heat, but seeds that are spread in the spring will lie dormant for as long as a year in order to wait for cooler temperatures in which to germinate. They are taking off now. The good news is that chickweed is edible. And apparently very

nutritious. The name 'chickweed' comes from the fact that chickens love it. All parts of it are edible. 'Green Deane' of eattheweeds.com fame was thrilled when, in 2009, chickweed finally showed up in his lawn. The bad news, however, is that one seed will form one plant that is huge! It's a groundcover of excellent proportions. In the shade, one plant can reach eighteen inches across! But if you don't eat it, suggestions from the UF/IFAS Extensions basically say that you must choke it out with desirable plants if you wish to eradicate it. At least to eradicate it naturally. There are chemicals that will get rid of it, but you know how that goes. Much care must be taken. A post-emergent seems to be the best tactic. But do your research. Read the instructions. I have found that pulling them up is easy if the ground is dry. If the ground is wet, not so much. I think (this is just my opinion, mind you) that the roots swell with water, which is what they live on when it gets drier. If you wait til the dirt is dry, they pop right out, long root and all. Of course, you have to find the center of it and pull there, or you'll just break the branches off, and where they break off, two or three will grow in their place (I kid....sort of...)

One of the nicest things about fall in this part of the state is the bloom season for ornamental grasses. Now is the time to enjoy them, but *not* the time to care for them. Most of grasses used in the South for ornamental purposes are of the warm-weather variety. They are actively growing during the summer. Fertilizing them now, when these grasses are in full bloom, can cause a flush of new growth, which may not be sufficiently hardened off when really cold (and possibly freezing) weather arrives. At the very least, you will be wasting your fertilizer. At worst, you could damage your lovely grasses. Spring is the only time to do anything with these beauties. In the spring, you may fertilize, cut back and mulch. Cut back to between twelve and eighteen inches above the ground. Mid-summer is another good time to fertilize. Then stand back and watch with amazement.

Happy Halloween and Happy Thanksgiving!