



Horticulture Hints March 2020

By Kathy Lingusky

And a big welcome to Pollen Season! With a capital “P” and “S”! With a fairly warm winter, all things have exploded. The cars are green, the HVAC filters are full and your nose is running nonstop. Gotta love spring.

What a busy month March usually is! Not only do we have our beloved Annual Plant Sale, our gardens are demanding of attention right now. The upside of this is that never is there a better time of year to want to be outside. The temperatures are wonderful, and getting your hands dirty is so much fun. But I’d like to talk about a few specifics.

There seems to be a lot of myth floating around about hydrangeas. I’ll try to clear up a few of them.

All hydrangeas love water. In fact, the Greek name “hydrangea” comes from “hydra” meaning water, and “angeon”, meaning vessel. But how much? I’ll get into that in a minute. First of all, you need to know which variety of hydrangea you are growing. There are three basic types: panicle, smooth, and large leaf.

The panicle type has flowers of a conical shape, and are usually white, or have a slight pink blush. They are not as common in central Florida as the others, as they are only hardy to Zone 8. Summers here are just too hot for it.



Hydrangea Paniculata

More common are the smooth variety, with “smooth” referring to the leaf texture. This variety has the large, spherical flower heads that are often seen in bridal bouquets and flower arrangements. This variety is hardy in central Florida. You can plant it in full sun if the soil stays moist most of the time. If you have the more common sandy, well-drained soil, partial shade would be best. Fertilization of this type can be tricky. They don’t need a lot of extra nutrition, and if they get too much, will fluff out with lots of foliage and few flowers. A well-balanced fertilizer only twice a year is recommended, along with amending



Hydrangea Macrophylla (Smooth Leaf Type)

the soil with organic matter. Pruning is another tricky item for these: the flower buds set on last year's growth, so if you prune in the spring, you may be cutting off your flowers. Prune only if absolutely necessary, and try to keep it to only getting rid of old and dead branches.



Hydrangea Quercifolia (Large Leaf Type)

As for the large-leaf varieties, the oak leaf hydrangea is one of this type. This beautiful Florida native flowers on old wood. So again, don't prune unless absolutely necessary. The large leaves of this variety offer more than just pretty flowers. The leaves turn beautiful colors when exposed to cold. This one will

prefer morning sun, if any, and it's best to keep it moist during the spring through early summer. It's OK to let it dry out a bit more in later summer and fall. Again, fertilize only spring and autumn, but amend the soil with organic matter.

As for the question of water, all hydrangeas do like to stay moist. The panicle and smooth varieties especially, will wilt slightly in the heat of a summer day. But if you notice that your shrub is wilted, and it isn't during the heat of the day, it needs water. In our well-drained sandy soil, you almost can't overwater.

And then there are the crape myrtles. One of my summer favorites. By now, we all know about "crape murder", and those who insist in cutting them back to the same point every year. I hear the poor things crying out to me in my sleep. Please don't do it! But there is a way to prune them so they aren't murdered in my sleep. First thing to do is decide whether you want a "standard" (tree-like, with one or more trunks, and a crown at the top), or a shrub. Crape myrtles will grow well into either shape. It's a matter of preference. Then, cut out all dead branches. Next, trim all branches that cross and touch one another. Pick the strongest branches to keep. Once you have done this, you can prune gently for shape. Be sure to observe your tree/shrub from all sides when deciding what to take off. After the flowers are faded, deadhead to get a second flush. The second bloom won't be as lush as the first, but keep the flowers coming if at all possible!

If you still have citrus trees that haven't succumbed to disease, now is the time to fertilize them. This is the recommended method to feed established trees: measure the circumference of the trunk about six inches above the ground. Use one-quarter pound of citrus fertilizer for each inch of circumference. Scatter the measured fertilizer over the surface of the soil just out past the drip line of the tree. Water after fertilizing to activate the nutrients into the soil. It's recommended to fertilize lightly four times a year: March, May, August, and October.

Enjoy this beautiful month: it only comes once a year! Happy gardening!