

This handout is designed to help you properly care for your new plants so they will grow and thrive for years to come. Please read carefully and follow these guidelines when caring for your shrubs.

Feeding

Your plants are living, breathing, eating, drinking life forms. They *must* have food and water to survive. The root systems of your new plants are no larger than the container they came out of for the first several weeks, so they will dehydrate more quickly than you might think.

There is no absolute rule for how much water a plant needs because this depends on slope, soil type, drainage, temperature, humidity, and a number of other factors. But one thing is for sure: if the plants do not get the amount of water they need when they need it, they will die. It won't help to rush out and give your plant an extra large dose of water today if it dehydrated and died yesterday. A general rule to follow when watering is that, unless the area of planting retains water due to poor drainage, your plants need deep watering two to three times a week to keep them healthy for the first year. If you get a good, drenching rain during a given week, you get a day off, but you'll still have to water your plants once or twice more that same week.

Signs of wilt require immediate attention, so don't just get around to it. Do it *now*. Timely watering is essential. The first year will be the most demanding. Over the next two years, the plants' root systems will grow and become more self-sustaining, but they will probably always need supplemental watering during drought seasons.

Note: It is possible to overwater your plants. If your planting area has poor drainage, this needs to be addressed. Constant moisture will cause plants' root systems to rot away, so if your plant is looking wilted and unhealthy and it is in a poorly drained area, watering is probably not the solution. Before watering, check to see whether the surrounding soil is moist or dry.

Nutrition for a plant occurs somewhat naturally. Plants receive nutrients from the air they breathe and the surrounding soil. However, since soil nutrients are unpredictable and often imbalanced, a supplemental source of nutrition will usually improve plant health and beauty a great deal. The best way to know for sure what your plant is getting from the soil is to send a soil sample to a horticultural lab such as the one available at Auburn University. In any case, a fertilizer formulated for ornamental shrubbery usually yields great results when applied according to the label.

I prefer 12-6-6 or 14-7-7 fertilizers. I apply this to all shrubbery except azaleas in mid-March, then again in middle to late June, and if we have a good heavy frost, again in late fall. For azaleas, I recommend waiting until immediately after their blooms have faded to fertilize, so that new growth won't shorten the bloom display.

Pruning

Heavy pruning is usually done during a shrub's dormant season, no later than February. Do not prune azaleas at this time, however, or you will cut off flower buds, many of which have been forming since the previous summer. Azaleas should be pruned immediately after flowering, and as little as possible after that. Never prune azaleas after mid-June.

I prefer to cut back monkey grass and prune crepe myrtles in middle to late February, but this can be done almost any time during the dormant season. Just be sure to prune before new growth starts in spring.

The amount of pruning a plant can withstand varies. Broadleaf plants can usually be pruned severely if necessary, but needle-leaf plants such as cedars and junipers will not re-foliate if they are cut down to barren branches. Needled shrubs must be kept at generally the size you want them at all times, because they can't survive deep pruning.

Weed Control

Weeds in shrubbery beds are best controlled by a combination of techniques. Hand weeding is the oldest and most tedious form of weed control, and it is still necessary from time to time. But there are other techniques and practices that will decrease the weed population and cut down on time spent pulling them up by hand.

Herbicides will aid in weed control a great deal. There are a few different kinds of herbicide to be considered. A *non-selective herbicide*, such as RoundUp, kills basically everything it touches, so it is good for areas where no vegetation at all is desired, but must be applied very carefully if it is near any desirable growth.

A *selective grass killer*, such as Poast, can be used safely around most broadleaf plants to kill invasive grasses like Bermuda even after they have intertwined themselves with desirable plants. When using a selective herbicide, always check the label to make sure it is safe for your plants, and follow the instructions precisely. Most selective grass killers can be applied right through the canopy of your ornamental shrubs, but do not allow the herbicide to drift onto any turf areas.

Pre-emergent herbicides are chemicals that keep seeds from germinating without damaging growing plants. If applied in early spring just before the soil warms up, pre-emergents can save hours of weeding and spraying weed killers. Follow label directions to find out the appropriate reapplication intervals. Usually you will reapply in mid-summer and again in the fall.

An effective non-chemical control method is weed control fabric. Placed on bed floors around plants, this will keep out a large percentage of weed growth. However, a few monocot weeds such as wild onion and nutsedge can penetrate the woven threads of the fabric.

Mulching is a good practice that will keep the weed population to a minimum, and the mulch feeds the soil as it breaks down. But as it decomposes, the mulch also feeds weeds, so it needs to be kept fairly fresh.

Total control of weeds will only be accomplished by a routine combination of all the above methods. Anywhere there is a healthy environment for plant growth, weeds will always be present to battle for nutrients.

Insect Control

There are over a million species of insects in the world today, not to mention a variety of other plant pests commonly found in our area. Some feast and leave; others post a mailing address. Control is determined by what kind of pest you have and whether he's just passing through or taking up residency. There is just no rule of thumb concerning pest treatments, other than to get help. Call your county agent or landscape consultant. Read labels. Many good garden centers have posters, reference books, or knowledgeable sales staff.

Some plant varieties have very few common pest problems, while others have insects named after their favorite host. Once you've become familiar with your particular plants, you'll quickly become equally familiar with their pest control needs.