



The Potting Shed is a free monthly newsletter from the University of Georgia Extension in Bryan County. We provide science-based information to help Coastal Georgia gardeners. Have a question or need help, contact your local County Extension Office.

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Flower for all Seasons

If you're looking for a perennial flower producer for this area then go no further. This is the one. There are so many different colors of beautiful verbenas today it is hard to make a choice. So, I am going to try and get them all; this is just one of the colors that I am looking for.

The Aztec Cherry Red verbena is a true, saturated red with no orange overtones. It might remind you of the red in our flag. There are 14 colors in the Aztec series that is coming from Ball Flora Plant. The Aztec series reaches about 10 to 12 inches tall, spreading to 18 inches.

All verbenas are great for the back yard wildlife habitat. Butterflies and hummingbirds find them delectable and deer usually avoid them.

Your happiness with any verbenas will depend on proper soil preparation. Add 3 to 4 inches of organic matter and till it to a depth of 8 to 10 inches. While doing this, spread 2 pounds per 100 square feet of a slow-release fertilizer like a 12-6-6, 8-8-8 or something fairly similar.

Provide full sunlight and water and you are well on your way to enjoying one of the prettiest groups of flowers available. There is one more important aspect to happiness with verbenas. They are vigorous plants that spread exceptionally well. They bloom for weeks and weeks, and then get a little tired. This is the time to cut them back, side-dress with a little fertilizer, and they will send out new runners and give more blooms. It is possible that you may need to do this twice in a long growing season, but that is how you keep verbena blooms in spring, summer and fall. Leaving those long stems will promote problems and also begin to look unsightly.



What to do in May

In May the weather is typically hot and there is little rain. Make sure to water your plants but be careful not to drown them! Camellias do not like wet feet. May is usually the time to make the second application of fertilizer. Be vigilant for pest problems.

MAY

Bulbs

One of the easiest perennials to grow is the daylily. It needs 6 hours of full sunlight daily to produce strong flower stems. Fertilize now to encourage numerous bloom sets. Daylilies usually grow in a one-sided direction. The leaves are 2 ranked or opposite each other around the stem. When buying daylilies select those with the most actively growing stems. They should flower for you this summer. Sometimes varieties won't flower but seem to be growing like gangbusters. The plant's roots may not yet be mature enough so give it another year. If they bloomed for years but have stopped, then division may be the answer. They can be divided every 3-4 years if you wish to share plants with a friend. but wait until September.

The foliage of spring flowering bulbs (tulip, daffodil, hyacinth) is turning yellow and can be cut back.

Fruiting Shrubs and Trees

Spraying every 7 to 10 days with insecticides and fungicides is the only way to have beautiful, unblemished fruit. Apples are prone to have cedar-apple rust, bitter rot and/or scab. Pears get fire blight and leaf spot. Peaches and plums get brown rot or bacterial spot and have worms in the fruit. So the only way to have blemish-free, beautiful fruit is to spray regularly until it is ready to harvest. When spraying insecticides make sure you pay close attention to any restriction - especially the number of days before you can safely harvest.

Lawns

It's time to fertilize and aerate established lawns or sod and seed new lawns. The first step in either process is to get your soil analyzed. The soil pH and current nutrient levels tell you a lot about the overall health of your turf grass. Fertilizer recommendation will be based on the results. Aeration solves compaction problems. You can either rent the necessary equipment or pay a lawn service to do this for you. Your yard needs aeration in heavy foot traffic areas or in heavy clay soil types. To check for compaction, stick a small bladed knife into the soil. Use only your thumb to push the blade down. If the blade doesn't go very far (1/2 - 1 inch) and is very hard to push, then your soil is compacted. Core aeration basically takes out small, circular, 1-inch diameter plugs of soil. This allows water and air to move deeper into the rooting area. Filling in the holes with sand or organic matter would be ideal. Mowing over the cores will help break them up.

Renovation may be needed in areas that did not green up or recover well from the winter. Planting lawns now has the advantage of allowing the grass to grow and get established over the long summer months. Sodding is the quickest and cheapest method of renovating small portions of your lawn. If you're establishing a new lawn, then you have two choices: broadcasting seed or laying sod. In either case there are a few steps before the ground is ready. First, have a soil test done and remove any home construction debris. Spray any unwanted vegetation with a contact herbicide (Roundup or Finale); leave it alone for 10 days and then till the soil 4-6 inches deep. Apply soil amendments, i.e. fertilizer, lime, compost, leaves, grit, chipped up/decomposed bark and good topsoil. Grade off the area so that water will drain away from the house and rake smooth. You are now ready to plant your selected turf grass. When broadcasting seed, sling half of it walking north to south and the other half while walking east to west. This ensures even coverage of seed. Water lightly immediately afterward and then daily until it sprouts. Do not stop watering until the young plants become established. Laying sod gives instant results. The sod should be laid in a brick pattern. Water lightly every day for a week, then every other day for another week and then a little less frequently. Mow new grass at 2 inches, so that the leaf blades are supplying lots of food for new roots. Wait about 2 months before using any chemical weed control.

Shrubs and Trees

If the month of April got away before you finished your spring planting, then consider May your last shot until November. The most important part of any home landscape is the foundation planting. This is generally some type of broadleaf or needle type, evergreen shrub. The most common mistake is placing shrubs too close to the walls of your house. You should leave plenty of room for the plants to develop naturally on all sides. Allow at least a 3-foot space between the wall and the planting. If your roof does not have gutters, plant the shrubs slightly forward, out of the roof's drip line. Never put too many plants (over-plant) in an area, trying to make it look full immediately. It's a huge waste of money. Plant at the recommended spacing and give the area a few years. The main chore associated with planting in May will be the extra watering necessary to keep the plants healthy. This is because they will not have time to develop an extensive root system before the summer heat sets in.

The most common request is for a list of plants that are evergreen and bloom all year long. This question always makes me smile because I know I'm talking to a true amateur gardener. My normal response is "There is no such animal." I do have a Top Five list of blooming, evergreen shrubs to share with you: abelia, pineapple guava (Feijoa), Florida anise (Illicium), witch hazel (Loropetalum) and banana shrub (Michelia). I left off camellia and azalea just because they have so many cultivars and are so well known to gardeners in south east Georgia. A more extensive list would include nandina, Indian hawthorne, Japanese cleyera, sweet olive (Osmanthus) and gardenia.

Glossy abelia is considered a semi-evergreen shrub that grows very fast and blooms profusely all summer long in the full sun. The graceful branches are covered with 1-inch leaves that start out red when young, then turn a glossy green at maturity and in the fall turns a bronze-purple. The flowers appear on current season's wood, so the trick to keeping it blooming is to keep it growing.

Pineapple guava has gray-green foliage with more silver on the underside and grows into a fairly dense mound. This drought tolerant shrub starts to bloom in late spring and is a car stopper. The fragrant flowers are an inch across and white with dark red stamens. In order to set fruit, several plants are necessary to insure cross-pollination of the flowers. The fruit is edible and also useful in dried flower arrangements.

Florida anise or star bush is a native evergreen shrub. It looks best when combined with other woodland type plants and needs filtered light. The olive-green leaves are aromatic when crushed and grow in clumps on the branches (appearing somewhat whorled). The maroon-red flowers have a rather unpleasant smell but some people seem to like it.

Chinese witch hazel is prized for its late winter flowers (January-March). The deep-pink flowers have ribbon-like petals. The red/purple/orange fall leaf color is another reason it has become so popular in the southern landscape.

The banana shrub is a slow growing, long lived, small tree that makes an excellent specimen plant. The leaves are a shiny, dark green similar to the tropical ficus trees. The flowers are a creamy white and smell like bananas. The fragrance is strongest on a warm, still spring day.

Another May chore is the pruning of spring flowering shrubs. Try not to prune at the same spot on a plant every year. Stagger your cuts if possible, but try not to destroy the natural form of the plant. Fertilize shrubs with slow release fertilizers. Apply a specialty fertilizer with iron to acid-loving evergreens such as azalea, camellia, gardenia, blueberry and banana shrub. After shrubs have reached the desired size be stingy with the fertilizer. One application annually should be sufficient.



Styrax americanus
American Snowbell

Flowers: showy, white, bell-faced blooms in May

Foliage: Deciduous, bright green, alternate, no significant fall color

Exposure: Performs best in part shade to almost full sun

Water: Medium. Water well when young

Habit: 8' – 10' at maturity, mildly suckering in good sites

Uses: Native mixed border, specimen small tree as a standard or multi-trunk, stream edges, woodland massing, wildlife habitat

No doubt this is one of the stellar native small trees or shrubs of Southeast Georgia. The American snowbell is a delight in bloom. Think about putting a bench under one, positioned to catch an early morning patch of sun. The more sun, the more floriferous; however, we've come to believe that an eastern exposure or at least an avoidance of the full western sun in the late afternoon should be a rule followed for normal landscape use.

The best use is in a natural garden woodland edging. For a specimen, go with a three to five trunk multi-trunk with the bottom 1/3 to 1/4 exposed to reveal the structure and bark. Some might and do use American snowbell as a single trunk standard small tree.

This species is a natural jewel in the mix of durable native plants adapted to South Georgia. I purchased this plant last fall. I do not like cultivars of native plants so I have been on the lookout for this plant in the natural setting. I found it along a road side that had been bush hogged many times. I felt it needed to be rescued so now I have this beautiful plant in my rehabilitation nursery.