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The Winter Solstice: A Plant's Perspective

After the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, the days will start to get longer again. But as the adage says, "When the days lengthen, the cold strengthens."

The winter solstice will occur on December 21. On that day, we will experience the shortest period of light and the longest period of darkness in 24 hours. It's the shortest day of the year.

As we approach the winter solstice, it's a good time to consider how light in our garden changes through the seasons. Plants vary in their need for light (shade-loving vs. sun-loving), but they must get the right amount of light to be healthy. The amount of light a plant receives profoundly affects how well it will grow. There are short-day, long-day, and day-neutral plants.

These day and night length markers are essential in the life of plants. This is known as photoperiodism, caused by photo (light sensing) receptors on plant cells. Proteins react, causing hormonal changes, gene expression, and growth signals.

Photoperiodic plants are also known as short-day plants. Plants don't measure the length of the day. They measure the length of the night. Camelia, chrysanthemums, poinsettias, and "Christmas cacti" are all triggered to bloom in the fall and Winter by the gradual reduction in daylight hours.

Then there are the long-day plants that only bloom in summer when nights are short and then lose their leaves and become dormant as the days grow shorter and colder. This is why our deciduous trees start dropping their leaves in the fall.

The Effect of the Solstice on our Lawns

In Florida, many of our trees do not lose their leaves. Suppose your lawn could hang on and scratch out an existence under those trees during summer; now that the day length is a full 6 hours shorter, that shade tree problem magnifies. All this will contribute to your lawn's slow growth and lack of vigor in Winter.



During the Winter, days are shorter, and the sun is low in the southern sky. But a far more significant influence that slows it down is the lack of sunlight. Warm-season grass needs sunlight to thrive - lots of it. In Winter, even if you don't have any shade trees for it to compete with, the days, in general, are much shorter.

The number one thing you can do for your lawn this Winter is to keep it watered. Lack of water in Winter is one of the primary reasons I see lawns go backward year after year. It's also a sure way to send your lawn into dormancy in Winter, even if you live further south in the state. Do not let the soil dry out for long periods.

The cooler temperatures will surely slow the grass down, but a far greater influence that slows it down is the lack of sunlight. Warm-season grass needs sunlight to thrive. In Winter, even if you don't have any shade trees for it to compete with, the days, in general, are much shorter.

After the winter solstice, the sun climbs higher until six months later, when it's directly overhead. Then it begins to descend once again. Understanding this cycle will help you take advantage of the conditions in your landscape throughout the year.

We hope that the natural world brings color and joy into your home and heart this holiday! Merry Christmas to all, and to all, a short night.

Your Landscape has a Christmas List Too

Because the sun is less harsh in the Winter and the temps are lower, it's a great time to plant some specific shrubs, trees, and plants. For example, if you have been thinking about adding some hedges, woody shrubs, or trees to your yard, the cooler temperatures make this a great time to do it. This is also a great time to add annuals and bedding plants such as dusty miller, pansies, violas, petunias, snapdragons, and begonia! Just keep an eye on moisture levels and water them well after planting.

While Florida does not have severe winter weather, Winter can come with its fair share of harsh factors – and those chilly temps do more than make you want to escape the cold. They also can wreak havoc on your landscape unless you take the proper precautions to get your yard ready for the days when colder-than-normal temperatures leave things a little bit frosty.

Even in Winter, your Florida landscape should still be a masterpiece. It only takes one bad night to do significant damage to your landscape, so here are a few steps that could help you avoid the winter blues:

TIME TO MULCH

The end of December is an excellent time to have us come out and mulch your landscaping. January and February tend to be colder months, and mulch moderates soil temperatures keeping roots warmer and warmer moister in the Winter and cooler in the summer. This is particularly important for certain more delicate plants. Sustaining moisture is essential during our drier months of Winter as well. A new layer of mulch also keeps fertilizer where it belongs, giving your plants a better chance of being fed and keeping that fertilizer out of our stormwater systems and, thus, out of our rivers and the Gulf.

TIME TO PRUNE

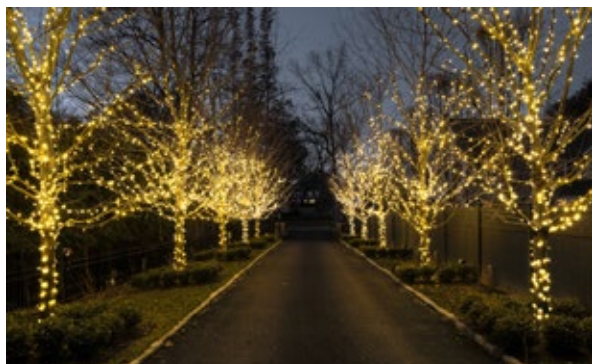
Many trees go dormant during the cold season, making it the best time to prune them. Many overlook the importance of having their trees professionally pruned by experts who understand exactly where to cut the branches to create strong, healthy trees. If you love roses, then you know that regularly pruning them has them produce a larger amount of beautiful blooms, and this time of the year is the best time to have your rose bushes and shrubs pruned, fertilized, and mulched. Winter is also an excellent time to have your deciduous fruit trees such as peach, plum, and Asian pear pruned, as well as You should also have your non-spring flowering trees and shrubs pruned this month.

TIME TO PROTECT DELICATE SPECIES

While our winters are not severe, they can dip occasionally, and you should prepare some of your more cold-sensitive plants for this by either bringing them indoors or covering them with a sheet.

TIME TO CONTROL WEEDS AND PESTS

Even during the dry season, plants and grasses grow more slowly but don't completely stop growing the way they do up North. But slower growth helps get ahead of controlling things like weeds, pests, and fast-growing non-native invasive plants. Because we rarely get anything close to a deep freeze, pest control for your plants is essential all year long. Winter is the time to apply horticultural oil to citrus, shrubs, and deciduous fruit trees, while those plants are dormant to control scale.



If electrified Christmas décor is on your 'To Do' list, take heed in running lengths of extension cords through your landscaping and across your property. If your property is under contract with a landscape management company, give them the heads-up that you've got some wires to watch out for so that your winter wonderland doesn't go bust.

There is a Fungus Among Us: Large Patch

With all these overcast skies and dew sitting on the grass all morning, you might start to see Large Patch disease creep into your St Augustine and Zoysia lawns. Turf fungal diseases can be challenging to manage, especially if they recur yearly. Even the healthiest lawn can get sick or suffer from a lawn disease.

With the weather cooling down ever so slightly, you may notice round, irregular patches in your turf with a distinct yellow halo. It is probably large patch. This is a more common and severe lawn disease during the cool season. The disease is caused by a fungus, *Rhizoctonia solani*, which can spread aggressively through the lawn when conditions are right. The pathogen is favored by cool weather, between 50-75° F, and continued leaf wetness for greater than 48 hours. Keep in mind it doesn't have to be raining or receiving irrigation for all of that time; cool weather with overcast skies, thick fogs, and, more importantly, thick thatch can keep the lower portions of the leaf blade sufficiently moist.

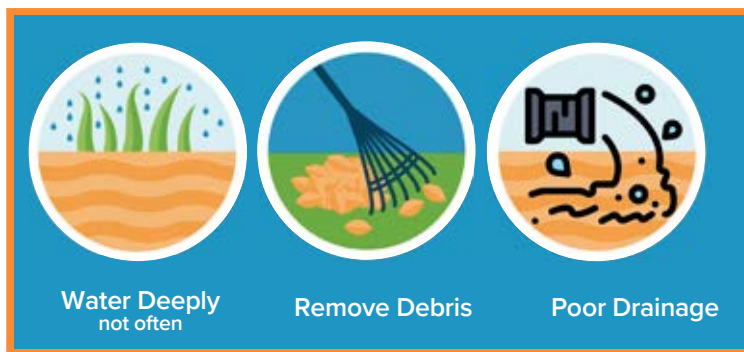
This disease attacks the leaves but not the root system. It generally starts as a small yellow patch of around 1 ft. in diameter that eventually turns reddish brown to brown as the leaves die back. These patches can spread several feet in diameter and may even have a green, apparently healthy lawn in the center. When inspecting the leaf blades, the bases of the leaves nearest the soil will be soft with dark rot. These leaves will easily pull off of the stem and will display a strong odor of rot.

Practices that Promote Healthy Turf

Don't fertilize in Winter when the grass is dormant. Fertilizing in Winter can cause problems the following year.

Also, check the irrigation system to ensure it only delivers ½" – ¾" water per irrigation event.

Mow at the right height for your turfgrass. Mowing is one of the easiest and best practices for encouraging healthy grass. Any more water than this can contribute to disease.



Major Contributors to Large Patch Infections:

Over-Irrigation - Reduce irrigation during the cool season; irrigate early morning when needed.

Excessive Thatch - Regularly manage thatch to <math>< 3/4\text{ inch}</math> thick (too late this year, the best time is early to mid-spring)

Poor Drainage - Improve drainage or select species suitable for the site.

Improper Mowing - This will stress the lawn unnecessarily.

Over-Fertilization - Excessive Nitrogen, particularly in late fall, makes warm-season grasses susceptible to disease and cold damage.

Irrigation

If you do not irrigate your St. Augustine lawn, it will start to go dormant in its weakest spots. This is an open invitation for a wild Bermuda invasion.

One of the best ways to prevent disease is to calibrate your irrigation system and use a rain gauge to measure rainfall so you don't over-water.

Minimize thatch and grass that attracts pests by watering only ½" – ¾" per irrigation event. After you calibrate your irrigation system, you'll know if you need to water more, less, or keep it the same.

If we get plenty of rainfall, cut back the irrigation that week. If we get several inches of rain, adjust your sprinkler system that week or turn it off. Too much water from rain or irrigation can contribute to fungus and disease.

What's the best way to control this pathogen?

Cultural controls. Proper irrigation, nutrient management, and lawn maintenance will limit this disease's issues. Always mow infected areas last to limit the potential for spread! If you've had issues with large patch in the past, consider preventive applications of approved fungicides.



Property Spotlight: Panther Trace

Panther Trace is located in a 785-acre master-planned community with distinctively designed villages of single family homes and villas in Riverview, Florida. The community has a park-like setting, a beautifully landscaped main boulevard, scenic wetlands, and nature areas. A winding street lined by pine trees takes you to the villages at Panther Trace, a community nestled in a park-like setting with miles of walking trails and playgrounds.

The community boasts two magnificent recreation areas featuring clubhouses, which form the centerpiece of the private Panther Trace Parks and Recreation centers. Encompassing two distinct amenity levels, you'll discover endless possibilities to relax, play and entertain your family and friends with lavish lagoon-style pools that meander around lush tropical foliage and water play parks for the kids. Other family-friendly amenities include separate playgrounds for toddlers and "big" kids, walking trails, tennis courts, basketball and volleyball courts, and multipurpose fields.

Panther Trace is not only an excellent place for families but also in a great location in the growing Riverview area.



“ Panther Trace CDD – Phase I

I am happy to say we have worked with LMP for many years. They are always responsive and attentive. Garth is always able to answer questions and ready lend a hand! The team on our property works well to keep our landscaping beautiful! Thank you!

Monica Vitale LCAM | Panther Trace CDD – Phase I | Facilities Director



“ Panther Trace CDD Phase II

LMP supplies a high level of service, quality, integrity, and dedication that starts at the top and continues with your team of personnel, from management to the crews. Garth is top notch and always quick to respond and willing to resolve any issues in a timely manner. LMP are truly unmatched in the industry.

**Anna Ramirez
Panther Trace CDD – Phase II
Facilities Director**

Interesting Facts about the Merry & Bright Poinsettia



- ① **Poinsettias are native to Mexico.** The ancient Aztecs used poinsettias to make red dye, and they turned to poinsettia sap to control fevers.
- ② **Contrary to popular belief, poinsettias are not poisonous.** While some humans and pets are sensitive to the plant's milky white sap, which contains latex, it is not toxic. It can, however, cause irritation to the skin, eyes, mucus membranes or digestive system (if consumed).
- ③ **Poinsettias aren't always red.** The plant is grown in more than 100 varieties including shades of white, cream, pink, purple, orange and yellow. There are also marbled and bicolor varieties.
- ④ **The showy, colorful part of the poinsettia isn't a flower – it's a modified leaf.** The poinsettia's modified leaves (called bracts) are often mistaken for the flower. Actually, the small yellow flowers (called cyathium) can be found clustered in the center of the bracts.
- ⑤ **Poinsettias need both sunshine and dark nights to bloom.** The shorter days and longer nights of late fall and early winter are what cause poinsettias to bloom this time of year. If they are planted near artificial light, such as a streetlamp, it disrupts their blooming cycle.
- ⑥ **December 12th is National Poinsettia Day.** The date marks the death of Joel Roberts Poinsett, the South Carolina congressman credited with bringing the poinsettia to the United States from Mexico. The U.S. House of Representatives passed a measure recognizing National Poinsettia Day in 2002.
- ⑦ **California is the top poinsettia-producing state.** Poinsettias are commercially grown in all 50 states. Other top poinsettia-producing states include North Carolina, Texas, Florida and Ohio.
- ⑧ **Poinsettias can grow up to 15 feet tall.** In their native tropical environment in Mexico and Central America, poinsettias are a perennial woody shrub that grows as high as 10 to 15 feet tall – more like a small tree than a houseplant.

Mistletoe: Maligned & Misunderstood

As plant parasites, mistletoes have a largely undeserved reputation as killers of forests and destroyers of trees. But just as in any commensurable relationship between species (including humans!), the reality is much more subtle than it initially appears.

The more attractive and familiar 'leafy' mistletoes tend to cause less damage though some mistletoe-infected trees have a shorter lifespan than their healthier neighbors. But their dead snags provide important nesting sites for woodpeckers and many other cavity-nesting birds and mammals, increasing the overall diversity, stability, and health of the entire ecosystem. Mistletoe often has a truce with the trees they infect, causing the death of only those trees already weakened by disease, drought, or old age.



'Tis the Season
to be
Jolly



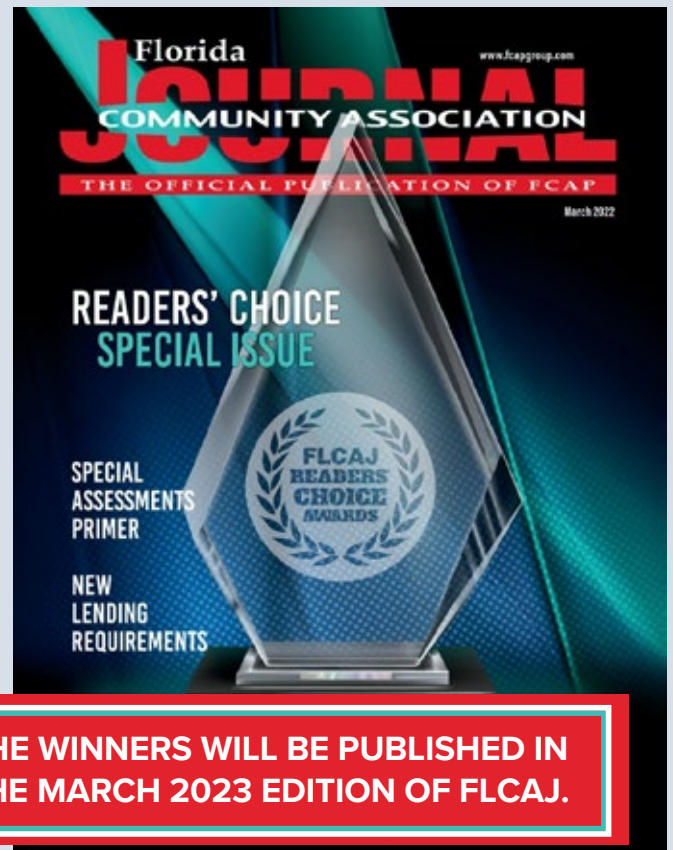
Birds and Mistletoes

Mistletoes serve essential roles in their ecosystems as food, mating, and nesting sites for various insects, mammals, and birds. Many birds rely on the abundant crops of mistletoe berries as part of their diets. Birds not only eat the fruits of mistletoe but serve as vital seed dispersers since the ingested seeds are often deposited on tree branches where they can sprout into new plants.

KEEP GREEN WE'VE BEEN NOMINATED AND WE NEED YOUR HELP

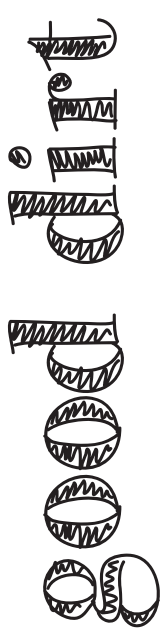


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Silver Bells & Dusty Miller

A plant that can be used as a wonderful complement to your garden is the hardy Dusty Miller. It offers striking white to silver foliage that makes for a beautiful companion plant in containers or as a border in garden beds.

They're relatively small, growing to approximately 12" inches, meaning they can be "layered" behind groundcovers and in front of flowers when building a tiered display.

It's a sun-loving plant that can tolerate growth in partial shade. It's also inherently resistant to pests and disease, although it doesn't actually repel said pests.

Some beneficial companions are Begonias, Phlox, Hosta, Snapdragons, and Zinnia. Other aesthetic companions are ornamental grasses, Petunias, and Angeloina.

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