

## **Be careful with pruning and fertilizing in winter**

With the milder weather lately, one of the worst things you can do in your landscape is to prune and/or fertilize. Both practices can stimulate new growth in your landscape plants at the wrong time of year.

Try not to encourage any new growth on landscape plants until all frost danger has past. Many times pruning will force a plant to produce new growth. This new growth will be much more susceptible to the next frost or freeze. And, it's best to not fertilize your landscape plants until the danger of cold weather has passed. Fertilizing too early can cause tender new growth that is much more likely to be damaged by cold weather.

It's okay to go ahead and prune out dead or broken branches, as you find them, always pruning back to live wood. Don't worry too much about leaf damage on woody shrubs and trees now. In most cases, as new leaves come out in spring, the old frost-burned leaves will drop off the plants.

On average, our last killing frost occurs around the middle of March. But, lately we've had near record highs. Our temperatures go back and forth all winter – one week is freezing, the next is spring-like. Waiting to prune allows you to make a better decision as to what has to be removed. Come spring, what does not produce new growth is removed (pruned). By pruning now, you may remove parts of the plant that did not have to be removed.

Despite these spring-like days, it's a mistake to begin fertilizing our warm season lawn grasses now. Applying fertilizer when your lawn is dormant or when it's not actively growing due to the shorter days and cooler temperatures of the winter months is comparable to you drinking a pot of regular coffee when it's time to go to sleep. Fertilize, especially nitrogen, interferes with the dormancy process, forcing the lawn to "wakeup" (produce new tender growth) at the wrong time of year when it is supposed to be "resting" or in a state of dormancy. You set the lawn up for damage. And you potentially waste your fertilizer as it is more likely to leach with the colder soil temperatures and because the lawn grass has fewer roots now to pull in the fertilizer.

The time to fertilize our lawns in North Florida is when they are actively growing. This equates to the first fertilization being made in April and the last fertilization being made in mid September, if needed.

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