



## Coming Events

### Workshops and Demonstrations

- Thurs., May 12, 10:00a  
*Gardening for the Wild Life*
- Thurs., May 26, 10:00a  
*Butterfly Landscaping*
- Thurs., June 9, 10:00a  
*Make Your own Rain Barrel - FEE\**
- Thurs., June 23, 10:00a  
*How to Garden With Children*
- Thurs., July 14, 10:00a  
*Preserving Your Bounty*
- Thurs., July 28, 10:00a  
*Fall Vegetable Gardening*

All classes will begin in the auditorium at the Agriculture Building and are free unless otherwise indicated\*. Registration is required. Call 336-570-6740, or register online here: <http://alamance.ces.ncsu.edu/>

### Contact us :

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## Just Say "No" To Mauna Loa



May is a great time to get out in the yard and start working on your neglected landscape chores. One of the chores I need to work on is the mulching of trees and shrub beds around my home. Some of the mulch washed away this winter and some has decomposed and needs to be freshened up a bit. Mulch has many benefits which include conserving water, reducing weeds, helping to maintain even soil temperatures and protecting trees from lawn mowers and grass trimmers.

The mulched area should include as much of the plant's root zone as possible. Foundation plantings should be mulched as a bed rather than mulching the plants individually. The recommended depth of mulch is 3-4 inches. While 3-4 inches is good that does not mean 6-8 inches of mulch is better. Too much mulch can encourage the growth of girdling roots and in some cases may suffocate the plants. "Volcano" mulching is commonly practiced, but is never a good idea. If the mulch is already 4 inches deep, then some mulch should be removed before adding fresh mulch.



# The Magic Of Mulch!

While mulch does help control weeds, don't be fooled into thinking it will control all weeds. Bermudagrass, nutgrass, dandelions and other perennial weeds will grow through the mulch. Some digging, pulling or carefully applied herbicide is required to get rid of those weeds. Another method of weed control to go along with the mulch is black plastic or landscape fabric.

Black plastic is not recommended because it can block water and air from getting to the roots. It also looks bad when the mulch gets thin and the black plastic flaps in the breeze. Landscape fabrics are more permeable to air and water, but I have seen weeds growing in decomposed mulch on top of landscape fabric. The fabric can also be a problem to remove when renovating landscape beds. In most cases you're better off not using plastic or fabric.

Mulches can be organic materials like bark and needles or inorganic materials like brick chips and rocks. Each has advantages and disadvantages. Brick chips and rocks can last forever since they don't decompose. They also don't need to be replaced on an annual basis. However, it can be difficult to remove leaves and other debris from rock mulch. A border should be installed to keep the rocks in the bed and not in the lawn.

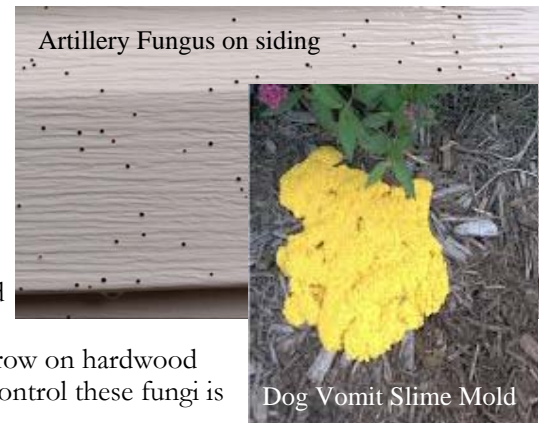
I prefer organic mulches because they do decompose over time releasing small amounts of organic matter and nutrients to the soil. Pine needles are my choice for large natural areas. Wait until all the leaves have fallen in the fall and then spread the pine needles lightly over the area. The leaves make a nice mulch base and the pine needles give a neat and finished look. Pine needles also work well on slopes where bark mulches may wash. In cases where washing has been a problem, the needles can be pinned to the ground with sod staples.

Hardwood mulch is very popular in our area. It has an attractive appearance and does a good job suppressing weeds. There are a couple of fungi problems with hardwood mulch you should be aware of. Slime mold and artillery fungus can grow on hardwood mulch. They aren't harmful to plants, but can be unattractive. The best way to control these fungi is to rake the mulch once a month or so and you will have no problem.

Pine bark is available in several sizes and is quite useful in the landscape. Pine bark fines, the smallest size available, works well as a soil conditioner. Tilled into our clay soils, it will loosen the soil and improve drainage. We use pine fines for mulch at our office because of the fine texture. It will wash if we have a hard rain. Shredded pine bark and mini-nuggets are also good mulches. They have a very neat appearance, but will also wash if the plant bed is sloped.



Landscape fabric, black plastic and gravel over time.



Artillery Fungus on siding

Dog Vomit Slime Mold



Mulched with leaves over winter

Not mulched

Mulch can also be very beneficial in the vegetable garden. Conserving moisture and controlling weeds in the garden will increase yields and reduce the amount of time spent hoeing and pulling weeds. There are many choices of organic materials that can be used to mulch the garden. Hay, wheat straw, shredded paper, cardboard, leaves and pine bark are a few of the options. Shredded paper and cardboard are good mulches, but need to be held in place with a little bit of some other mulch material or they might blow away. Hay and wheat straw are good mulches even though they may contain some weed seeds. I prefer to use older hay and straw that has decomposed a little and is less likely to have as many weed seeds. Pine bark fines are a good mulch and can be incorporated into the garden at the end of the season to help improve the soil. My favorite mulch is leaves. The price is usually right (free) and the leaves can also be tilled into the garden.

We often get calls about mulch attracting termites. That is not really a problem. Mulch can create moist conditions that termites like and may contain wood that can be a food source. As long as your home has been inspected and treated on a regular basis, a few termites in the mulch are no concern.

Avoid using raw wood like tree chips or sawdust as mulch until they have composted for a year or so. The microorganisms that break down these materials take nitrogen from the soil as part of the process. This can lead to a nitrogen deficiency unless you add more nitrogen.

If you have any questions about mulch or any other gardening topic, please give me or Chris a call.



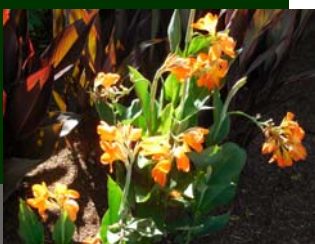
## May Garden Tips



When azaleas, rhododendrons and other spring-flowering shrubs have finished blooming, prune if needed. Be sure to complete this chore before the end of June, so that next spring's flower buds have time to form.



Wait until tomatoes set their first hand of fruit before applying a balanced fertilizer (10-10-10). Repeat in 3 weeks. When the soil temperature reaches 70 degrees, it's time to plant warm-weather vegetables such as lima beans, southern peas, okra, sweet potatoes, peppers, watermelon and cantaloupes.



Begin fertilizing Bermudagrass lawns this month at the rate of 1 pound of actual nitrogen per 1,000 square feet. Reapply at this rate in June, July and August. Apply half this amount in September.



As always, a soil test will help you determine the proper fertilizer amounts to apply no matter what you are trying to grow—from vegetables to roses, lawns to blueberries. The soil test is free at the NCDA Soils Lab from now until the end of November. Call Cooperative Extension for more information on how to collect a soil sample: 336-570-6740.

Continue to plant summer-flowering bulbs in the flower border. Cannas, callas, dahlias, gladiolus caladiums and elephant ears are a few colorful choices. Pinch out growth tips of newly-planted annuals to promote branching and make stockier plants. Continue to remove spent flowers of annuals and perennials throughout the season.

When spraying to combat insect pests, keep in mind that beneficial insects share the same plants as the bad guys. Use low-toxicity pesticides when possible, spray at dusk, and avoid spraying flowers as pesticide residues can harm bees. Always read and follow label directions for safe pesticide application. When in doubt of pest or plant, call Cooperative Extension for help: 336-570-6740.

Move your houseplants outdoors when night temperatures stay above 60 degrees. Avoid sunburn on the leaves by moving the plants gradually from the relative darkness of the house to their bright summer location. Start in a shady spot and progress slowly to brighter light.

Mowing your lawn at the proper height for the type of grass is especially important as temperatures rise. Keep Bermudagrass lawns at around one inch. Fescue and fescue-bluegrass lawns should be cut no shorter than 3-1/2 inches. These heights will help maximize turf density and crowd out weeds as well as the other, less desirable grass type.

Remember to water newly-planted shrubs and trees unless there is an inch or more of natural rainfall during the week. A two- to three-inch layer of fresh mulch will help conserve moisture and keep the soil cool. Read Mark's article in this edition of Alamance Gardener for all you need to know about the magic powers of mulch!

Fertilize blueberries, blackberries and grapes this month. Find out just what your berries need with a free soil test from Cooperative Extension Service. Phone 336-570-6740 for more information.

## Arbor Gate Plant of the Month



Catmint

*Nepeta x faassenii*

This *Nepeta* cultivar is a dwarf, mounding, bushy perennial growing to around 12" tall. Features small, abundant, two-lipped, trumpet-shaped, dark blue flowers in loose, interrupted racemes (to 6") atop square, leafy stems with soft, aromatic, gray-green foliage. The first flush of bloom is in May, but with proper shearing of spent flower spikes, you can expect almost constant rebloom until frost.

Catmint prefers a sunny site, but would appreciate a bit of afternoon shade in the heat of summer.

Although *Nepeta cataria* is the true catnip which drives house cats ecstatic, the leaves of this hybrid catmint are also attractive, albeit less enticing, to cats. Luckily, deer don't find this plant very attractive.

In addition to being deer resistant, Catmint is drought tolerant and actually prefers a dryer location, even shallow, rocky soils won't hold it back.

Great for borders and as a small scale ground cover. Fine for containers, too! At Arbor Gate, we like to see it spilling through the fence.

Read more here:

<https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/all/nepeta-spp/>

