Welcome to March madness and an exciting time for all Florida gardeners. It’s time to get enjoy the warm sunshine by pruning and planting in your garden. Before you plant, it is good to prune back your existing shrubs and perennials. In this month’s Journal, Nancy King and Howie Johnson give us their insight into how, what and when to prune, so that when our gardens begin to wake up, it does so happily. Ed Rhinehart and Howie Johnson would like to share some of their favorite spring flowers with you. These will give your landscape lots of color. Jim Davis will tell you about a native tree, the Youpon Holly, and, as always, we’ll share an Amazing Fact, so enjoy this month’s Journal and I’ll see you out in the garden.

Spring and Summer Color
Ed Rhinehart

Let’s get ready, spring is around the corner and I am getting excited! What should I plant that will bring color and interest to my yard? As mentioned in my last column, I love to experiment, and through this, I have found two great annual flowering plants that work well in this area of Central Florida.

Have you ever planted pentas in your yard? This flowering plant grows well in both sun and partial shade. Although it grows only to fifteen inches or more, it is continually full of small flowers on many stems. I usually plant the pink variety, but you can also purchase the plant in red, white or a combination of these colors. I like to have the pentas in my landscape beds but it does well in planters also. Pentas will attract butterflies and does not require excessive amounts of water. A little fertilizer will go a long way.

My second favorite is angelonia. I never had much success with this plant in the North, but last summer ours just bloomed and bloomed and bloomed! These plants tolerate the heat of the summer here in Florida, as well as being drought resistant. Angelonias can be put in sun or partial sun. You can purchase angelonias in the colors of white, pink, lavender or purple. This plant will grow from 18 to 24 inches. Surprise! They may return next spring depending on the severity of the winter. Don’t cut them back until the possibility of frost is over, which is traditionally March 15th.
March Flowers -- and Let’s Hope April Showers!
Howie Hohnson

It’s March. My Gardening Calendar for this month celebrates the passing of the last “normal” frost date for our part of Central Florida, March 15th. The petunias, pansies, verbena, snapdragons and dianthus did a marvelous job of providing that necessary touch of color to an often-drab landscape throughout the winter months. All of these winter bedding plants bloomed in grand fashion in spite of our freezing temperatures. These November plantings are now in decline and need replacement. My focus will be on spring bedding plants to provide a fresh accent in my landscape. I’ll also include bedding plants grown in containers to add a splash of color to the porch and patio area.

When selecting bedding plants for beds, borders or pots, I find it best to limit the choice to as few kinds as possible. Combinations of many flower colors and plant forms can distract from the overall appearance of the display. Some of the most attractive flower displays can be created by using just one plant species. Other important considerations are size of plant at maturity, flowering season, light/shade requirements, and the background setting for the bedding plants.

In my garden, the most important element for successful gardening is soil preparation. Our central Florida sandy soil needs all the help we can give as it has very low nutrient and water holding capacities. As bedding plants grow and bloom best in a fertile, rich, moist, well-drained soil a little work preparing the flower bed before planting will be richly rewarded. Add at least six inches of organic matter to the soil and evenly incorporate into the bed. This increases water holding capacity, nutrient retention, and increases soil oxygen. If replanting an existing bed, add more organic material each time new plants are added. Pots should be cleaned and filled with fresh potting soil.

Annuals to consider for March planting include ageratum, alyssum, amaranthus, baby's breath, celosia, calliopsis, dusty miller, gazania, hollyhock, impatiens, lobelia, marigold, pentas, rudbeckia, salvia, shasta daisy, sweet williams, verbena and zinnia. A few of the perennials which do well in our area are black-eyed Susan, gaillardia (blanket flower), jacobina, butterfly weed, firespike, goldenrod, lion’s tail, sage and stokes aster. This short list of nine can be found among the many perennials you’ll find in local garden centers and nurseries. Have fun with your bedding plants. Get planting!

Pruning Your Hibiscus
Howie Johnson

The Chinese hibiscus has been grown in Florida for years. It is believed to be native to China and was introduced to Florida several centuries ago by trading ships traveling back to America from the Far East and Hawaii.

Most hibiscus varieties have flowers that last only a day with blossoms opening early in the morning and wilting by late afternoon. A few varieties of hibiscus may remain open a bit longer but usually no more than two days. While the flowering season is nearly all year in southern Florida, the winter frost and freeze conditions in Central Florida will cause significant dead areas. Heavy pruning is best done in the early spring (March) and should not be done late in the fall or in the winter. Once plants begin to sprout, be sure to prune below the sprout to cut into green healthy wood. New sprouts will form just behind the pruning cut, so if you want the shrub to branch down low, you need to cut some of the stems down low.

Light maintenance pruning may be done any time of the year to remove diseased or dead wood, rubbing branches and weak or droopy
growth. These light maintenance trimmings through the spring and summer growing season will promote dense growth.

Please keep in mind hibiscus blooms are produced on new growth, so blooming is delayed and reduced if the plants are pruned heavily during the active growing season. Plants can be pruned to maintain a desired size and shape without disrupting their blooming or appearance by cutting only the longest one-third of the branches at one time. The next longest third of the branches may be cut 30 days later, and the remaining third cut 30 days after that. Light, periodic pruning avoids the need for heavy pruning.

Much like other holly plants, Weeping Yaupon Holly trees can be either male or female, called dioecious. If you want a plant that produces berries, be sure to select a plant that has berries already on it from a nursery or garden center. Berries are produced during winter and are a favorite with songbirds and other wildlife. The branches are also a great nesting site. Light pruning may be required to maintain its shape.

Weeping Yaupon Holly
*Ilex vomitoria*
‘Pendula’

Jim Davis
Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Extension Agent I

Weeping Yaupon Holly is one of the most under-utilized plants in the landscape. This North American native is as tough as they come. Weeping Yaupon Holly is extremely drought tolerant, but can also thrive in wet or poorly drained soils. No pH test is needed due to its adaptability to both acidic and alkaline soils.

Weeping Yaupon Holly makes a very nice specimen plant in the landscape. Its weeping nature adds a sense of informality to the garden. This small tree can also be used as a screen when placed 8 to 10 ft. apart.

USDA Hardiness Zone: 7A-9B
Sun: Full Sun, Part Shade
Soil: Any type
Fertilization: Minimal, if any
Irrigation: Only as needed (when established)
Pests: None of any significance
Companion Plants: Coontie Palm, Indian Hawthorn, Muhly Grass, Dwarf Walters Viburnum, Gamma Grass, Asiatic Jasmine
Drought Tolerance: High
Height: 15 to 30 ft.
Spread: 6 to 12 ft.
Growth rate: Moderate
Firebush (*Hamelia patens*) is a plant native to Florida, Central and South America. A one foot tall specimen planted in the spring can be 5 feet tall by winter. During a freeze, it will die to the ground, but regrowth from roots is extremely fast. Firebush flowers all year until it freezes. If you have never been able to attract hummingbirds, a firebush is almost a 100% guarantee you will have hummers. The Zebra Longwing, Cloudless Sulphur, Pipevine Swallowtail and Gulf Fritillary butterflies love firebush for its nectar.

**Amazing Fact 1:** Occasionally flower mites (*proctolaelaps kirmsei*) will get on firebush. The flowers only have 12 hours in which to shed and receive pollen. Bees, butterflies and hummingbirds can fly from flower-to-flower on the bush, but how do the mites get to another flower with nectar? For this mite, only .5 mm long, it would be a long walk on a big bush. So picture this: a hummingbird is taking nectar from a blossom, the mites run up the beak and into the nostrils (nares) of the bird and hitch a ride to the next nectar source. When the hummingbird pushes its beak into another flower, the mites run down the beak.

**Amazing Fact 2:** The orange-red blooms are tubular, very narrow and 1” to 1.5” long. So how do the bees get the nectar? The bees make a slit at the base of the blossom to reach inside the blossom. After the slit is made, all other bees visiting the flower feed from the same opening.

**Amazing Fact 3:** The firebush is used for its herbal properties. Leaves and stems are used for tanning. Crushed leaves can be applied to cuts and bruises. It is used in washes, in lotions to relieve swelling of the legs, rashes, insect stings and skin fungus. Researchers have found that extracts of firebush contain several active phytochemicals which have antibacterial and antifungal properties.

This is a wonderful plant for the landscape. If you would like more information, please check out [http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fp237](http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fp237)

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**Turf Wars 3**

Joe Mahoney

The month of March is also the beginning of spring and with spring comes new growth in your landscape and turf areas. With the warmer temperatures, many homeowners will begin to add fertilizer to their landscape and turf with the expectation that the fertilizer will accelerate the natural process of the plants waking up.

It is best to plan out a strategy before buying that first bag of fertilizer. Think about the landscape areas that you routinely would fertilize. Are the areas stressed from the cold winds of winter? Are there plants and turf that did not respond as well as you thought they should when you fertilized them last year?

Fertilizers have a series of three numbers that describe the way they work. The first number is Nitrogen which promotes vigorous new growth. The second number is Phosphorous which promotes new budding and flower formation. The last number is Potassium which promotes root growth and strengthening.

Most homeowners will begin their fertilizer routine with a large dose of Nitrogen enriched fertilizer early in the spring. This gives turf a growth boost that can be very impressive at first. This growth burst also increases the likelihood that you will have a massive invasion of fungus during the summer.

Instead of the massive Nitrogen boost, try using a balanced blend like a 10–0–10 or a 6-6-6 for a start. These ratios will work effectively on your turf and shrubs. If you really think that a heavier Nitrogen amount is necessary, use a 16-0-10.

Always check the label and look for a high amount of insoluble Nitrogen. Insoluble Nitrogen lasts longer and helps to ward off the crash that so many lawns suffer when all the soluble Nitrogen is either used up or is washed away. You may notice that many fertilizers have the Phosphorus removed.

Florida water sources have a natural occurrence of high levels of Phosphorous dissolved in them. The level is so high that sample
readings taken in farmer croplands were off the scale in Phosphorous readings. For this reason a timeline was established for the fertilizer manufacturing companies to begin removing the phosphorous from their products.

With few exceptions, you will see most fertilizers with a “0” for their middle number. This does not make the fertilizer inferior in any way. In many ways it enhances the growth of your turf by reducing an overabundance of Phosphorous. An overabundance of any one element in your landscape will hinder healthy growth. You see this happen quickly when you apply too much nitrogen to turf and end up with a “burnt” look.

If you plan on applying fertilizer to your turf, apply it in a timely manner. The best times seem to be starting at the beginning of March then applying slow release every two months thereafter with the last application in the beginning of September. Apply a micronutrient supplement every two months starting in February.

At this point you have two schedules to follow: One for micronutrient fertilization and one for general fertilization. You now know what to look for when shopping for both items. You have also learned how to obtain a pH test for your soil.

The next article will focus on turf insect pests and how to control them effectively with a minimum use of pesticides.

Q & A’s

**Question**: My azaleas are blooming now, when should I prune them?

**Answer**: Pruning azaleas should be done immediately after they finish blooming. Begin by pruning off dead or injured branches. Then prune back tall, gangly limbs shooting out of the top of the bush. Lightly fertilize and mulch with an acidic mulch, such as pine straw or pine bark nuggets.

**Question**: I just moved to Sumter County. When should I start preparing new beds for flowers and herbs?

**Answer**: Now is the perfect time for everyone in Zone 9a to prepare for planting. Remove all dead plants that did not survive the winter freeze. (The ground in this part of Florida does not freeze. Be careful not to remove any plants that you want to keep, they may come back from the roots. Examples: hibiscus, bush daisies, firebush, etc. Wait a while longer to see if the new shoots come up from the base.

**Tip of the month**:

As soon as the weather starts to warm, get out and check your sprinkler system to make sure all sprinkler heads are in working order and watering properly. Filters in each sprinkler head should be cleaned of any sand or blockage.
# March Calendar of Events

- **Registration & Info:** 352-793-2728

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Location</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Every Mon.</td>
<td>9 am - 3 pm</td>
<td>Plant Clinic</td>
<td>Sheriff’s Annex</td>
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<tr>
<td>Every Wed.</td>
<td>9 am - 3 pm</td>
<td>Plant Clinic</td>
<td>Bushnell Ext.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Every Fri.</td>
<td>9 am - 12 pm</td>
<td>Plant Clinic</td>
<td>Bushnell Ext.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mon.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Florida Gardens Q &amp; A Panel Discussion</td>
<td>Truman</td>
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<td>Thurs.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Florida-Friendly Landscaping Class</td>
<td>Oxford Comm.Ctr</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fri.</td>
<td>11-12 pm</td>
<td>Sumter County Fair</td>
<td>Sumter Cty Fairgnds</td>
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<td>Sat.</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Enter your favorite plant in Master Gardener Horticulture Show!</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mon.</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Rain Barrel Workshop</td>
<td>Bushnell Ext.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tues.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>New Residents’ Workshop</td>
<td>Colony Cottage</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tues.</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Twice on Tuesdays - Ticket Required</td>
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<td>Jim Davis – Florida Yards and Gardens</td>
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<td>Free available, Tues, Mar. 8 at Savannah or Sea Breeze 9 am to 4 pm, Tues. to Fri. until sold out.</td>
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<td>9 am - 10 am Turf - St. Augustine/Zoysia</td>
<td>Savannah</td>
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<td>1 pm - 2 pm Turf - St. Augustine/Zoysia</td>
<td>Sea Breeze</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sat.</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Spring Fling Plant Sale</td>
<td>Wildwood Comm. ctr.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Many vendors with lots of plants &amp; garden items</td>
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* You can send questions to mailto:plantclinic@aol.com. Attach any pictures to your e-mail.

## Addresses

- **Bushnell Extension Office**
  7620 SR 471, Bushnell
- **Savannah Recreation Center**
  1545 Buena Vista Blvd, The Villages
- **Sumter County Fairgrounds**
  7620 SR 471, Bushnell
- **Colony Cottage Recreation Center**
  510 Colony Blvd, The Villages
- **Sea Breeze Recreation Center**
  2384 Buena Vista Blvd, The Villages
- **Truman Recreation Center**
  2705 Canal St., The Villages
- **Oxford Community Center**
  4027 CR 106, Oxford
- **Sheriff’s Annex**
  Cor Morse Blvd/Rt. 466, The Villages
- **Wildwood Community Center**
  6500 CR 139, Wildwood

**The Foundation for the Gator Nation**

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