

*One of the things I like most about plants at the Brookwood Community is that in addition to great quality, you always have new and unusual varieties. What is your favorite new introduction this year?*

Brookwood always looks for new introductions and I'm glad you've noticed. There are several I have been pleased to add to our production. Ensete gives you the tropical look of a banana plant but is not invasive. Mandalay Begonias are one of my favorite new hanging basket plants. If I had to pick one introduction as being my favorite, it would be Cajun Hibiscus. After seeking the input of the president of the Lone Star Chapter of the American Hibiscus Society, we added several cultivars in the Cajun series to this year's production. The plants are well-branched and strong, but the unique color combinations of the flowers make this series a must-have. They are like nothing I've seen before.

*Last year I had problems with chinch bugs in my yard. It seems like overnight they destroyed my grass. How do I prevent chinch bug damage this year?*

Start by using good cultural practices such as mowing at the proper height for St. Augustine. Cutting St. Augustine turf at a height of 2 ½ - 3 inches will help prevent thatch buildup which is a breeding environment for chinch bugs. This also helps keep weed pressure suppressed because the thick bladed St. Augustine shades the weeds as they try to grow. NOTE: This helps suppress weeds but should not be relied on in place of preemergent herbicide applications to prevent weeds! Keeping the grass well-watered, especially in the hottest areas will help prevent chinch bugs as well. Apply enough fertilizer to keep your lawn healthy (3-4 applications per year) but avoid excessive applications to help prevent chinch bugs. When all these things are accomplished, be on guard for the first sign of chinch bug activity. Yellowing or dying patches of grass should be your first clue. Take a coffee can with both ends removed, press into the soil along the edge of the damaged area and fill the can with water. Wait a few minutes and if chinch bugs are the reason for the damage, you will see them float to the top of the water-filled can. Liquid insecticide applications can then be made when you deem them necessary, thus limiting the amount of pesticides used in the landscape. If you know you already have chinch bugs, granular insecticides do not usually work quickly enough to prevent extensive damage. Liquid products containing the active ingredients Bifenthrin, Acephate, or Permethrin are your best options. Spray once a week for 3-4 weeks until you have eliminated all generations. Granular applications made in late April – early May using products containing the active ingredients Imidacloprid or Bifenthrin can be useful as a preventative but are less environmentally friendly.

*I read somewhere that plant breeders have created sun-tolerant Impatiens. Have you ever heard of this?*

There are two main series of Impatiens bred to be sun-tolerant; Fanfare and Sunpatiens. Both varieties look very similar to New Guinea Impatiens but grow much larger. I have been skeptical of how well they handled full sun in Texas but after seeing the trial gardens at the Dallas Arboretum I had to try them for myself. Both seem to be pretty tolerant of our sun but do best with some light shade during the hottest part of the day.

They need to be planted in rich soil and should be watered deeply in the morning. You will find greater sun tolerance if you get them planted and established before our days get excessively hot. In contrast to shade Impatiens, if these varieties get wilted after a hot day, they do not drop blooms from moisture stress and will quickly perk back up after irrigation. Both Fanfare and Sunpatiens will spread 2-3 feet but the growth habit of Fanfare is more uniform and it is a heavier bloomer. Both varieties will also tolerate shade so they are a good option for those landscape beds that are shaded in the spring and exposed to the sun as it moves farther north in the summer months.

*I have a tropical Bird of Paradise plant in the sun in my backyard that does not bloom. What's wrong?*

If you have the less common, white-flowered *Strelitzia nicolai* you could be waiting for many years. They will not start blooming until they comfortably reach their mature height of 20 feet or greater. Assuming you are growing the more common, orange-flowered *Strelitzia reginae*, there are some things you can do to help it bloom sooner. Light exposure is not likely the problem if you have it planted in sun. The foliage tends to look best if it receives light afternoon shade but it does need at least 4 hours of sunlight to bloom. The key is that this Bird of Paradise likes to be crowded before it will bloom reliably. You can contain the clump with edging. If your BOP is a specimen planting, try adding a nice rock border in the size you want the clump to grow. If it is part of a larger mixed landscape or if a border on a specimen planting would not match the rest of your landscape, try burying a circle of metal edging around the clump. In either case, once the BOP has filled the area and become crowded, it will have a better chance of blooming. It will become necessary to thin the clump at some point but they definitely prefer to be root bound. They are also relatively heavy feeders. BOP should be fed every 3-4 weeks during spring and summer months and I have read that they benefit from rotating fertilizers. A good rotation would be to use a balanced fertilizer (10-10-10) and then use a high-phosphorous fertilizer (like Super Bloom 12-55-6) for the next application.

*Is it true that using weed & feed products on my lawn might be damaging my trees?*

It is true. Weed & feed products seem like the best answer for accomplishing weed control and fertilization at the same time, but if you read the label, even the weed & feed products say that they should not be applied within the drip line of trees and shrubs because of the damage they can cause to the root system. Most landscapes have enough trees and shrubs planted that the root system extends throughout more of the lawn than what can justify the use of weed & feed. Many of the roots are within the top foot of the soil and the active ingredient in weed & feed products is quite mobile in the soil system. If I had a new lot without trees and a heavy weed infestation I might justify the use of weed & feed but otherwise I cannot endorse these types of products.