**WEB**

**Q & A**

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Q. The sparrows and cardinals seem to eat the seeds and leaves from the moss roses in containers. Am I imagining things?

A. No, other gardeners report the same phenomenon. The seeds are easy to explain as a food source, but the foliage must also be providing the birds with nutrients and water. Try putting out an alternative water source, such as a bird bath, and see if it cuts down on the leaf damage.

Q. How do we know if the sparse areas in our St. Augustine lawn are caused by shade, water, disease or insects?

A. Excessive shade is the usual cause, but all of the stresses you listed can contribute. Fertilize with a slow-release lawn fertilizer, water once per week, if drought restrictions allow, and see how the lawn recovers over the next month. You can also hand water the dry-looking areas to see if they respond to more water. If the lawn does not respond, shade is probably an issue. If you have too much shade for St. Augustine, you either enjoy the shade and tolerate a thin lawn or convert to a shade-tolerant groundcover. Asiatic jasmine, dwarf ruellia and monkey grass are all more shade-tolerant than St. Augustine.

All St. Augustine has about the same shade tolerance, but Floratam has superior drought and disease tolerance. Put in a few squares of Floratam in the worst part of the lawn and see if they are more vigorous than the old variety.

For more information on diagnosing lawn symptoms, visit plantanswers.com.

Q. What does it mean if our tomatoes have black leathery areas on the bottom?

A. A break in the water stream entering the plant and into the ripening fruit causes the symptom you describe. That stream of water transports calcium. The black, sometimes brown, tissue is a result of a temporary calcium deficit. It occurs if the soil dries out and is very common for container-grown tomatoes when the weather changes from a cool to hot temperature. Keep the tomatoes well-watered. The fruit can still be eaten if you cut off the scar tissue.

Q. Which trailing lantana is better for summer color, “New Gold” or lavender?

A. Lavender lantana has some shade tolerance and blooms earlier in the spring and later in the fall than “New Gold,” but “New Gold” does best in full sun in mid-summer. To prevent lace bug attacks on the “New Gold,” spray acephate or Spinsad every three weeks beginning in June. The lace bugs reduce the bloom.

Q. Does Mexican white oak grow faster than live oak? Both seem to be great shade trees.

A. Yes, Mexican white oak (Monterrey oak) has a much faster growth rate. It grows as fast as Texas red oak. All of the oak trees mentioned, along with Lacey oak, chinkapin oak and bur oak are excellent shade tree choices for South and Central Texas.

For questions about horticulture, water conservation and the environment, email Calvin Finch at [Calvin.finch@tamu.edu](mailto:Calvin.finch@tamu.edu)