

Gardening Question and Answer

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Q. What is happening to my lawn? It looked good all winter but now it is looking yellow and the turf is declining. Does it need fertilizer?

A. Based on your description I believe that your winter lawn included rescue grass and/or annual bluegrass that are technically grassy weeds. They decline now that the temperatures are warming up. The yellowing you see is probably the winter weeds dying. Soon your hot weather permanent lawn (St Augustine, zoysia, or Bermuda grass) will take over. Fertilize when you have mowed the summer lawn grass twice.

Q. The only peach tree that bloomed this spring was the Florida King. Now our Junegold, Texstar, and Rio Grande trees are finally putting on some scattered leaves. I fertilized with slow release lawn fertilizer last month. Was it the freeze that affected them? Will they survive?

A. It was a lack of cold weather last winter that has put many varieties of fruit trees in the same state as your trees. Each variety of peach, plum, apple, and pear requires a minimal number of chilling hours every winter to “reload” its chemistry and stimulate bloom and leaf production. Chill hours are usually defined as hours of temperatures between 32 and 45 degrees F. Junegold, for example, needs about 550 hours of chill to function well. The trees may produce leaves and get back in production next year if there is enough cold weather in 2017/2018. If we have another warm winter, some trees will die. Visit plantanswers.com for the chill hour requirement of the fruit tree varieties. In the meantime just let your trees proceed as best they can.

Q. What is porter weed? You keep mentioning it as an outstanding source of nectar for butterflies and I have never heard of it or seen it in any nurseries!

A. The porter weeds are of the *Stachytarpheta* genus. They are native to Asia, South America, and one species, (*S. jamaicensis*) the blue porter weed is native to Florida and the Caribbean. Porter weed is called snakeweed in some areas because of the distinctive twisty stems that emerge from the base of the plant and have small lengths of brightly colored blooms that are a potent nectar source for butterflies. Here in San Antonio, the dwarf red porter weed (*S. sanguinea*) and the purple porter weed (*S. cayannensis*) are sold at some retail nurseries. Dwarf red grows to two feet tall and purple porter weed grows to 4 feet tall. They bloom attractively all summer. Porter weed is sensitive to temperatures below 26 degrees F so needs to be treated like an annual in Central and South Texas.

Q. Is it too late to plant tomatoes? What about peppers?

A. It is not too late to plant tomatoes but do it as quickly as possible and use the largest transplants that are available so they can beat the heat. Use heat setters such as Tycoon, Celebrity, 444, Phoenix, BHN 968, BHN 602, Red Deuce, and Valley Cat. The timing is good for peppers and eggplant.

Q. Our new home has live oak trees. Growing at the base are what I thought at first were seedlings but when I tried to dig some up, it is clear that they are suckers off the parent tree roots. Do I dare mow them down? What about oak wilt?

A. Yes, go ahead and mow them with your lawn mower or a string mower. It is common for some live oaks to put out suckers as you describe. Since the stems are so small there does not seem to be any threat from oak wilt. The trees defense chemicals are distributed and are able to resist the spores of the disease in the case of the oak suckers.