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News Release

Long term effects from this year's drought

Question: What are some of the possible long term effects of the severe drought we experienced this year?

Answer: I think the long term impact could be great and not just because of the drought. The spring started out with a devastating late Easter weekend freeze event that hammered many of our landscape plants. The damage was most severe north of the metropolitan Birmingham area but the entire northern half of the state was affected. This event laid the groundwork for what could be described as “the perfect storm” (pun intended) of plant stress.

Plants that had already spent energy reserves putting on new leaves had to pull from more reserves to re-leaf after the freeze event. This alone is very stressful but the stress got much worse when the drought hit. As if these two occurrences weren't bad enough we hit the “dog days” of summer with prolonged exceedingly high temperatures. Because of water restrictions many plants were not watered properly and may have already died this summer. Many more may not have enough energy reserves to regenerate lost roots this winter. It is possible some trees and shrubs that looked fine going into the winter may not leaf out in the spring.

The plants most likely to die will be the very young (5 years or less), overly mature (politically correct for old), previously damaged, overcrowded, and those on poor soils. There is not a lot that you can do at this point except reduce the competition for limited water. For trees in the landscape I suggest you kill the grass underneath the canopy and water (if permitted) the zone near the tree drip line (where outer limbs reach). Plants will use some of their energy reserves to produce new roots even during the winter. The long range forecast is for a drier than normal winter. Therefore, even an occasional deep watering could make a difference this year. Do not fertilize until late winter, if at all and then be very judicious and don't over apply. Too much fertilizer will stimulate excessive vegetative growth that may further stress the tree.

You may be approached by people telling you to have your trees topped to reduce the stress on them but this is very bad advice. Topping trees is something that should only be done to prevent damage to utility lines. Making large pruning cuts will further stress the tree because it encourages excessive vegetative growth and requires energy reserves to

“heal” the wound or fight off pest that enter through the wound. Sometimes trees will naturally lose limbs but you should wait and let the tree “decide” which limbs need removal. A weak tree will often have individual large limbs die as a way to save the remainder of the tree. In the spring you may notice this happening and subsequently need to remove dead limbs before they become a hazard.

A less noticed but nevertheless real effect of the drought is reduced natural food sources for wildlife. When food sources are scarce in the wild the deer and other wildlife may become a greater problem. Therefore, I expect an increase in wildlife damage to our landscape plants. Also, birds that overwinter or migrate through the Southeast may have a hard time finding food as well. You may want to fill your bird feeders early and often to give them a little extra help this year.

The bottom line is we will not know the full effect of this years “perfect storm” for quite some time. For more information on caring for drought stressed trees and shrubs visit: <http://hort.ufl.edu/woody/drought.html>.

For more about this topic please contact Tony Glover, Regional Extension Agent-Home Horticulture, Home Gardens and Home Pest Management at the St. Clair County Extension Office at (205) 338-9416 or email gloveta@auburn.edu.

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