

# From The Roots Up

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This is your first insect/disease spray visit for the year. Just a reminder, if you have not done so already, be sure to turn on your irrigation and check the system for leaks or misplaced heads. The later in the spring you wait, the harder it is to get on someone's schedule.

So far, the weather has provided us with an adequate supply of rainfall with January being almost 2" above average. Regardless of what our rainfall totals may be, be sure to turn on your irrigation system by late March if it has been off for the winter season. We may be getting adequate and in many cases too much rainfall, but this can quickly change and you should be prepared to provide adequate irrigation when the rain becomes scarce.

## Look Out For Late Freezes Causing Damage

While we did not get the polar vortex mega freeze we received at Christmas of 2022, we still can get late season freezes that can damage plants especially any plants with new growth. Even though our weather gets more temperate as we move into the spring, any winter damage to plants will continue to look damaged until they start putting on new growth in the spring. If we continue on our warmer trend, plants such as camellias and Japanese Magnolias can show swollen buds as early as mid February. This can be problematic if we have a harsh late season freeze. If we do have a late season freeze event, you can expect a less than a heavy flowering this year.

In any case, damage to buds and the full extent of the damage to the plant themselves may not be obvious for multiple weeks after the freeze

episodes. In most cases, the plants will recover but some may be so severely damaged they may need to be replaced. If you see burned leaves **wait until mid to April to prune** the damaged plants to avoid stimulation of new growth before we are past the chance for freezing weather.

## When Should I Mulch?

As far as mulching, you should replenish your pine straw whenever it is thin but optimally **after** you do your spring pruning. (You also need to replenish your mulch each fall and if done correctly your fall mulch layer should be adequate until spring.) **By waiting to do your mulching after you prune, you can cover any small pruning debris left over from the pruning operation.**

During the pruning, it is important to **clear the base (or crown) of your plants** of any mulch or debris that may have accumulated. Clearing the mulch and debris allows for proper airflow. Not clearing the base of debris buildup can result in insect and disease activity causing the base or crown to deteriorate and eventual decline. Crown rot has killed more plants than drought. **Thick layers of rotted mulch should be removed before installing the new mulch to prevent hair root growth into these organic layers.** If excessive hair root growth occurs in these layers, the root system and plant will decline especially in boxwoods and azaleas. I can personally attest to the importance of removing matted mulch layers. I had to remove 3 big ball arborvitae after they died due to "drought conditions". The matted mulch created a water proof barrier causing a drought situation and eventual plant decline and death. To replenish your

mulch layer, use about 3" of fluffed pine straw to yield a final layer of 1½". Or, about 1" of bark mulch should be used to yield a final layer of ½" though bark can float out of your bed areas.

## Winter Bronzing

Each year we see bronzing on the boxwoods, cryptomeria and arborvitae. While there has been ample rainfall this winter and root damage from dry roots should not be a problem, plants with poor drainage can develop root damage from rot and lack of oxygen. Root damage from root rot or freeze damage can cause winter bronzing. This is especially true with boxwoods. **Bronzing is usually related to root issues caused by poorly drained or excessively dry soil conditions, though it can also be related to the decline at the base of the plant as well.**

The cryptomeria and arborvitae are more affected by the extremely cold weather but can also be predisposed to additional winter injury and bronzing due to wet or dry soil conditions. If the bronzing is cold related, these plants should be fine but the discoloration **may last into the late summer.** If, on the other hand, the problem is drainage related or due to a damaged base those issues must be addressed and corrected before any improvement can be expected. **In boxwoods especially, keeping those bases clear of debris will help reduce damage,** though it is important to be sure the plants are correctly installed at the initial planting. Periodically cleaning the debris out of the base of the boxwood will help ensure they do not develop aerial roots that can permanently damage boxwoods. It is always a good idea to clean debris that can accumulate in

any of your plants to help avoid premature deterioration of the plant's base and ultimately the plant itself.

### Sucking Insects and Sooty Mold

Scale and aphids feed by sucking on the plants and extracting the nutrients but do not utilize the plant sugars and water. This "honey dew", which is the plant sugar solution, is then excreted coating the leaves and stems of the plants being fed upon or, in many cases, the plants that are below the infested plants or trees. This results in a black fungus called sooty mold forming on these surfaces and is very noticeable and is an indicator of aphid or scale activity somewhere. However, the presence of sooty mold does not necessarily mean **your plant** has scale or aphids. Often we find that the trees overhanging your planting are actually the location of the insect and the honey dew is simply raining down on your landscape plants. A major contributor to the honey dew is from the hackberry aphid, an invasive aphid that was introduced to the United States in the late 1990's. If you have a hackberry tree, then you definitely have this aphid.

The remedy for this is to treat the large over-story tree (we can provide this service at additional cost if you are a full shrub and tree customer). Simply hosing off the under-story plants also reduces the problem. During years of consistent rainfall, the honey dew is less of a problem due to the rinsing effect of the rain, so you are **less likely** to have the problem.

Sooty mold does not need to be treated as it does only cosmetic damage to the host plant. Even if treated, the sooty mold coating will only diminish with the passing of time.

### Plant Spot light: Plants that should be avoided

Each plant spotlight we cover plants that look nice in the landscape and that work well in our area. This time I thought we could focus on some plants that should not be put into your landscape. Here is a short

synopsis of the bad and some alternatives:

**Boxwoods:** Due to the ongoing boxwood blight, we cannot recommend installing any type of boxwood including the Korean types. Any Japanese holly will substitute, especially the Soft Touch holly that can stand in for the Dwarf English boxwood. We also recommend the Steed's pyramidal holly that can be used in place of American boxwoods. **Leyland Cypress:** The Leyland is very susceptible to several diseases including Seiridium Canker which is not treatable and can be deadly. Most of the canker diseases are a result of plant stress caused by dry conditions, but once the disease causing agent moves into the tree, there is no cure just proper watering to slow it down. A good substitute for a Leyland are Cryptomerias. These trees serve much the same purpose (privacy) and are not susceptible to much and are more tolerant than Leylands of improper watering. Keep in mind, trees need 5 gallons for each inch of trunk diameter per week!

**Dwarf Indian Hawthorne:** There are numerous variation of dwarf hawthorne and all of them have issues with leaf spot to some extent. The University of Georgia has a great handout on the problems and more resistant varieties. In our experience, the Bay Breeze is one of the worst for leafspot disease. These varieties can also be very touchy to excess cold and will defoliate and even die off in sections that are exposed to cold winds.

**Otto Luyken Laurels and actually the Laurel group as a whole:** These plants have issues with poorly drained soils which leaves them susceptible to root and crown issues such as root rot and stem canker. They also are very susceptible to leaf spot, shot hole disease, scale and spider mites. Even with a spray program, it is very hard to reduce these problems and shot hole disease is not treatable. Some plants that are good replacements for both the hawthorne and the laurels would be Japanese Compacta holly, dwarf

loropetalum such as "Daruma", Dwarf Burford holly or a Distylium which is a member of the witch hazel family. All of these plants are relatively problem free and are better choices for your landscape.

**Knockout roses:** These roses are highly susceptible to rose rosette disease that will eventually kill the rose plant and spreads easily enough to adjacent roses that a whole planting can become infected and die off very quickly. Rose Rosette is caused by a virus that is spread by a Vector mite. Our spray program can reduce the amounts of the mites moving in your rose plantings, but once the plant has been infected with the virus it causes abnormal growth patterns such as witch brooming, excessive thorns, stunted growth in the stems and a reddish purple coloration on top growth. Once a plant is infected, removal is the only option as there is no cure or treatment. All roses are susceptible to Rose Rosette to some degree, but we mostly see knock outs effected by this disease in this area. Lastly, Flowering Cherries: Yoshino and Kwansan have severe problems with Botryosphaeria canker for which there is no cure. Most of the time, it is not a question of "if" a cherry will be infected, but "when". Cherry trees also do not like our clay soil and have issues with our cold and hot weather pattern we get into during the spring. Most of the time, cherry trees enjoy a shorter life span here in Atlanta. As they age, they will die off in sections dropping branches to the point they are no longer serviceable. Try Autumnallis or an Okame for a better option.