

Prevent Horticultural ‘Homicide’

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Examples of horticultural foul play are evident all around. Some are in private landscapes and can possibly be excused due to the lack of gardening knowledge by the homeowner, but many occur on public property that is maintained by paid “landscape professionals.”

A far-too-common sight around North Florida are ‘mulch volcanoes,’ formed when mulch is piled high around the base of a plant. The assumption is that the mulch will protect the base of the plant and help preserve moisture. The reality is that mulch up against the trunk of the tree can provide an ideal environment for insects and fungi to invade the trunk of the plant. Rather than form a ‘mulch volcano,’ form a ‘mulch donut.’ Keep the area immediately adjacent to the trunk dry and free of mulch. The mulch that is applied should be no more than 2 or 3 inches deep.



Figure 1. A ‘mulch volcano’ can promote fungal diseases and insect damage to the trunk.

Another common sight are small, narrow ‘landing strips’ of grass between sidewalks and curbs. Many of these small strips are only inches wide. Think of the effort that is put into maintaining these areas! Each must be trimmed with a weed-eater rather than with a mower because of their size. Save the grass for larger, more easily maintained areas, and eliminate the increased maintenance. Mulches, groundcovers or other paving materials are all better alternatives.

Why do many landscapers insist that each plant in a hedge must be treated as an individual? The phrase “united we stand, divided we fall” can be applied to many hedges around our area. Each plant is meticulously manicured in its own unique style. Unfortunately, hedges are not about individuality; they are about unity. The plants in a hedge should all be maintained at the same height, and they should be allowed to grow together to form a continuous row of plant material.



Figure 2. A hedge pruned using the “united we stand, divided we fall” pruning technique.

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Too-large plants in too-small spaces are often seen in our landscapes. Here is a bit of important information – plants, especially trees, can grow quite large. Just because they look small and ‘cute’ in the garden center doesn’t mean that they will remain that way. Think long term. Always consider the mature size of a plant (10 years at the minimum) before planting. Do the homework. Many plants are sold with information labels which give an estimated average size. However, please understand that plants may grow even larger than average.

Please don’t use the approach of repeated, drastic pruning to keep what should be a large plant in a confined space. An excellent example of what not to do is the oft-observed technique of ‘crape murder.’ Too many people, including many paid landscapers, remove most or all of the past-year’s growth each spring. This practice is done not only for size control, but also in the mistaken belief that it will encourage flowering. In fact, research has shown that the plant will flower more and longer if allowed to grow naturally. The best practice is to choose the proper cultivar. Crape myrtles have cultivars appropriate for all size needs. There are small, 2 to 3 feet tall cultivars and there are cultivars that eventually may reach 40 plus feet. Choose carefully; follow the adage of ‘right plant; right place.’

An important fact about plants that is often ignored is the fact that plants do about as much growth below ground as above. Unfortunately, we often take the attitude of ‘out of sight, out of mind’ with our plants. Remember the root system. A true horticultural crime often seen around North Florida is digging through and covering over the root system of plants. Many mature trees are permanently damaged each year by unintentional root destruction. The results may not be apparent for months or years, but when they do become apparent, they may result in costly fixes. Remember that, while not seen, the below-

grown portion of a plant is just as important as what is above ground.



Figure 3. A crape myrtle that has been subjected to repeated, excessive pruning - ‘crape murder.’

Become a horticulture crime investigator. See how many ‘horticulture homicides’ you can prevent. Becoming informed about proper gardening and landscaping techniques allows you to become part of the solution not part of the problem.