

## Yard and Garden – 08-01-09 – Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

Symptoms may include elongated, straggly, spindly stems with a few, fading blossoms and yucky, yellowing leaves.

August has arrived, and chances are that is how things may look in container plantings. Although insect pests and/or diseases can cause similar symptoms, more than likely, once beautiful patio or deck plantings are now looking a bit rag-tag and running out of steam. The fact is they are in need of a little TLC. With a little extra maintenance applied now, one can enjoy the beauty of flowering containers until frost.

Most gardeners know the major difference between container plantings and those planted directly in the garden is the soil. Container plantings are usually filled with a soilless potting mixture. This type of potting medium is light-weight, convenient to handle, free of pathogens and fortified with a slow-release fertilizer. By now, most soilless potting mixtures have lost nutrient value and need replenishing.

Since the medium has exhausted most of its nutrient value, one can easily replenish it by using a well-balanced soluble fertilizer. Typical products would have an analysis ratio of 21-19-19 or 20-20-20. Because soilless potting mixtures dry out more quickly than garden soils, it is always a good idea that one water first, before fertilizing. About an hour later, return and fertilize the planting. Applying fertilizer to a moist soil will usually prevent leaf burn which commonly results from fertilizing plants that are growing in dry soil. Use the amount of product and frequency indicated in the directions.

One should avoid excessive fertilization. Although the temptation exists to add a little more fertilizer than what the label calls for, the result of over fertilization is generally excessive vegetative growth with fewer flowers. This quick lush growth is frequently weak, creating an invitation for insect and disease pests.

Furthermore, plants used in container plantings are often annuals. Annuals, compared with perennials, have the ability to bloom all summer long; perennials usually bloom for only a short period of time and are then finished blooming for the balance of the season. Notice, when I described annuals, I indicated they have the **ability** to bloom all summer long; however, that is not a guarantee. Their ability to bloom is often directly related to their regular maintenance.

An annual plant's objective is to grow, mature, flower, produce seed and die, all in one growing season. To insure the proliferation of blossoms, one frequently needs to deadhead. Deadheading involves removing spent flowers on a routine basis. This removal of spent flowers prevents the production of seed. As a result, the plant continues to bloom. Even if one has been consistently deadheading, many of the container plants may now have stems that are spindly and elongated. Often the flowers appear only at the ends of the stems which have sparse, yellowing leaves. The solution: give the plants a pruning.

Use a sharp, clean scissors or pruning shears to clip about one third of the stems. This aggressive shearing promotes new growth, resulting in new branching stems with new foliage and more blossoms.

Lastly, keep in mind that another ongoing maintenance procedure required for container plantings is frequent watering. Roots of container plantings are exposed to heat and subject to drying out more quickly than those plantings in the garden. During hot spells it may involve watering more than once a day.

No one desires straggly, spindly, yucky, yellowish, pale-green foliage with few flowers. By following these midseason container gardening tips, one should be able to keep one's planters blooming vibrantly until frost.