Over the past 25 years or so, I’ve worked as an Extension agent and, for about 10 of that as a landscape contractor. Although technology has changed a lot in that time, one thing hasn’t. Many clients still don’t believe that there are problems that don’t have good solutions. And, others refuse to accept that common lilac, hybrid rhododendrons and Kentucky bluegrass just won’t perform in southeastern North Carolina no matter how much money you throw at it.

Lawns are often the major concern for most new homeowners. Let them know about the tough issues that can affect their lawns. Most of the sand ridges in the area (e.g. Pine Valley in New Hanover County) are riddled with ground pearls. We don’t have any great answers for this scale insect although Bermudas and some of the more aggressive zoysias like Crowne and Zeon seem to hold up better. Large patch affects all of our turfgrasses in wet areas. St. Augustine may be attacked by chinch bugs and grey leaf spot. Fine-textured zoysias and Bermudas struggle with dollar spot in summer.

If they are attempting to grow a lawn in areas that receive less than six hours of sun each day, suggest shrub beds and/or shade-tolerant ground covers. Even our most shade-tolerant turf – St. Augustine – won’t grow well with less than six hours of light.

Some of our problems aren’t related to diseases and insects. Soil fertility wreaks its own special havoc. High pH soils leave yellow, iron deficient turf in their wake; especially centipede grass. Low potassium and phosphorus, excessive phosphorus, extreme acidity (low pH) and marginal magnesium are just some of the issues you may find. Standard soil samples are still available to you without a fee, so take advantage of it. We have all of the boxes and information sheets and we’ll even get the samples to the lab for you.

Nematodes – those dastardly, microscopic roundworms that attack the roots of turfgrasses – are fairly common in sandy soils. Sting nematode is most problematic although soil assays will usually identify ring and other types of nematodes. There aren’t any legal nematicides for home lawns anymore unless you count products based on crab shells like Clandosan. (it works IF you can incorporate it into the soil)

Let them know that, although they may not have the perfect lawn, they can have something flowering or making a show just about every day of the year in our mild climate. Add a witchhazel or Japanese flowering apricot for winter flowers. Plant those shrub roses that may slow down in the heat of summer but produce flowers all the way to a hard freeze. Enjoy the sweet smell of gardenia as an outside shrub. Incorporate tough herbaceous perennials like rudbeckia, echinacea, salvias, hellebores and daylilies to keep the flowers coming.

Fighting nature and the climate is much like beating your head against a wall. It feels so much better when you stop.

Al Hight
County Extension Director
Brunswick County Cooperative
There is a season of glory for every plant, a time when its most stunning feature is displayed in complete splendor. For most plants this occurs in spring, summer or fall, seasons that are more congenial to plant growth. But for a few exceptional plants, winter is the time of the year they flaunt their best characteristic. Such plants are invaluable for their ability to brighten even the coldest, darkest days of the year. Most winter interest plants are prized for their attractive bark, foliage or berries, yet winter blossoms are uncommon. Flower petals are the tenderest of plant tissues, so it is a rare plant that offers them up to relentless winter frosts. One such plant is the witch hazel, an underused and enchanting large deciduous shrub that deserves a place in more Cape Fear landscapes.

Witch hazels belong to the genus *Hamamelis*. Worldwide there are several different species of witch hazel, many of which are native to the eastern USA. The showiest and most readily available of this genus are the result of crosses between the two Asian species, *H. mollis* and *H. japonica*. These hybrids, known as *Hamamelis × intermedia*, produce deliciously fragrant blossoms in shades of yellow, copper, and red from January through March. Witch hazel flowers occur in clusters along bare branches, with petals resembling shredded confetti, much like the flowers of their close relative, *Loropetalum*. These delicate blossoms are best displayed against a background of evergreens, such as hollies, or surrounded by an evergreen ground cover like monogras. They also combine well with early flowering bulbs like ‘February Gold’ daffodils or starflower (*Ipheon uniflorum*), and should be placed somewhere their drifting fragrance can be enjoyed, such as close to a path or near a patio.

In the landscape, witch hazel prefers to grow in moist, well drained, acidic soils that have been well amended with organic matter, in sun to part shade. They will actually tolerate quite a lot of shade, though flowering is more prolific when planted in sunnier locations. They make excellent partners to azaleas and camellias, who also relish these woodsly conditions. Most varieties will reach 15’ in height and width with horizontal or upward sweeping, wide spreading branches and an open, informal habit. They are outstanding when grown as small multi-stemmed trees, and are an excellent choice for a specimen or focal point. Summer foliage is medium green and generally disease and insect free, reliably turning shades of yellow, orange and scarlet in fall even in coastal landscapes. Of the many *Hamamelis × intermedia* varieties that have been selected and named, three are most commonly available:

- **‘Arnold’s Promise’**
  - Introduced by the Arnold Arboretum, ‘Arnold’s Promise’ is probably the most commonly encountered witch hazel in American landscapes, producing an abundance of clear yellow flowers from late January through early March and bright yellow fall color. Grows 15’-20’ high and wide, with upward sweeping branches.

- **‘Diane’**
  - Produces copper-red flowers in February, on slightly ascending wide spreading branches, reaching 12’-15’ in height and width. Orange to red fall color.

- **‘Jelena’**
  - Also known as ‘Copper Beauty’, ‘Jelena’ bears glowing coppery-orange flowers in late January through February on ascending, wide spreading branches. Grows 12’-15’ high and wide. Orange to red fall color.

Overall, witch hazel is a beautiful, easy care small tree, attractive year round with outstanding winter interest that deserves to be more widely used in our area. Seek this plant out to add a distinctive touch to the landscapes you design.
Turf may be dormant, but weeds are not. Winter annual weeds are in full force and now is the time to prevent germination of summer weeds.

**Winter Weeds**

Annual bluegrass is the #1 weed in North Carolina. It can be controlled with pre-emergence herbicides applied prior to germination, but what about post emergence control now that it is big and shaggy? In non-overseeded Bermuda and zoysia residential lawns there are many options for control, including Revolver (formsulfuron) and Monument (trifloxysulfuron-sodium). Kerb (pronamide) or atrazine with a crop oil surfactant will work well for centipede and St. Augustine. Other problem weeds this time of year include henbit, bittercress, and chickweeds. These broadleaf weeds can be controlled with two, three, or four way herbicides that contain 2,4-D. Various sulfonylurea herbicides such as Manor (metsulfuron) will also work. Wild garlic is another cool season nuisance, and can be controlled with imazaquin (Image), as well as 2,4-D with a nonionic surfactant, or Manor. Of course, the bigger these weeds are, the harder they will be to control. To improve the effectiveness of an application, watch the weather and find a warm day. Postemergence herbicides will not be very effective if used when the temperature is below 55F.

**Summer Weeds**

As soon as it warms up, summer weeds will start germinating. That means your preemergence control needs to be done before it gets warm. There are several great preemergence herbicides that provide effective control of crabgrass and the like, and split applications almost always work better than a single full rate application. You can apply these herbicides pretty early (even January), because the cool temperatures will keep them from degrading and you will get long lasting control. One word of caution if the turf is still establishing or there are bare spots -- be careful about using a herbicide in the dinitroaniline (DNA) family (Balan, Surflan, Pedulum, Team Pro, Barricade) or Dimension (dithiopyr). These herbicides work well, but they also retard the root growth of your desired grass as it grows into and attempts to colonize the sparse areas. This is particularly a problem with StAugustine and centipede which only have above ground stems (stolons). If you have such a lawn, you may need to avoid preemergence herbicides altogether and only treat weeds after they emerge. In the short term, the lawn may have more weeds, but a better root system will make it more vigorous in the future.

**Timely Tips**

**It's too late** ...do not apply atrazine or simazine to bermudagrass or zoysiagrass after December because it will delay greenup.

**Now is the time** ...prune trees and shrubs that that bloom on new growth such as crape myrtles or do not have showy flowers (like hollies). Cut back ornamental grasses and liriope before new growth begins.

Apply mulch or preemergence herbicides to prevent germination of summer weeds.

**Not yet**...do not fertilize turf and ornamentals until they are actively growing. Applying fertilizer in winter is wasteful because the dormant plants do not take up the nutrients and the fertilizer can be leached out of the rootzone. Wait until April or May to fertilize turf and ornamentals.

Do not prune spring flowering plants like azaleas and indian hawthornes until after they have bloomed. These plants set flower buds the previous summer, and winter pruning will cut off all those blooms.

— John Wooldridge, Commercial Horticulture Agent—New Hanover County
Upcoming Events

**February 24th—ProDay**  
8:30am – 4:00pm
Specialists from NC State University will present a total of 4 hours of pesticide recertification credit. The morning sessions will focus on managing insects in ornamental plants and pesticide applicator health. The afternoon session will focus on turf pest problems. The event will be held in the McKeithan Center at the North Campus of Cape Fear Community College on Blue Clay Road.

**March 10th—Pruning for Professionals**  
1pm—3:30pm  
New Hanover County Arboretum Auditorium  
We will present techniques, tools, and tips to help you keep plants looking good throughout the year. Weather permitting, there will be outside demonstrations. There is no cost, but registration is required. Call Danyce at (910) 798-7662 to register.

**April 7th—Bedding Plants Workshop**  
9:00am—Noon  
New Hanover County Arboretum Auditorium  
Learn about the best bedding plants, how to care for them, and the latest in disease and insect management. One hour of pesticide credit will be applied for in Ornamental and Turf. Cost is $15 and registration required. To register, visit http://newhanover.ces.ncsu.edu/index.php?page=events

North Carolina State University and North Carolina A&T State University commit themselves to positive action to secure equal opportunity regardless of race, color, creed, national origin, religion, sex, age, or disability. In addition, the two Universities welcome all persons without regard to sexual orientation.