

Ficus Whitefly and Other Thoughts
Councilman Mike Dahlgren

From my perspective, it seems as though many of our residents have not only attacked the Ficus Whitefly but seem to be winning the battle. My congratulations on your efforts, not to mention your expense! Commercial applicators seem to be doing a good job and the follow-up will be the deciding factor. Where there have been control problems, it appears that it can be attributed to lack of water. No matter who treats or how treatment is applied it can't be successful without adequate water. Some commercial applicators have injected a liquid form into the root zone making some think additional watering is not necessary. No matter how the chemical is applied, it must be moved into the root zone before it can be taken up into the plant. Water is essential for this to occur. There are exemptions from Water Restrictions for chemical application. Ask your applicator.

Please remember the point about the chemical being translocated upward in the plants. Plants other than Ficus will also take it up. Blooming plants have the potential of moving the chemicals into the flowers where they could affect butterflies and bees. Be careful of edible plants growing close to treated Ficus. Your herbs or citrus could have taken up the chemicals. Ask your applicator to assess your situation if you are in doubt.

People have asked me to add suggested substitutes for Ficus in future articles. I have refrained from any recommendations as personal tastes are as varied as the material available. I would strongly suggest that you check out the Web for good ideas. I have found that Miami-Dade has some extremely useful information on their site, with links to others. The address is: http://miami-dade.ifas.ufl.edu/Pests_HT.shtml. In the center column, the second item is "alternatives to Ficus". Click on it and a helpful publication is accessible in PDF format. If you have a problem, stop by City Hall. They will be glad to see you and can help you get the information.

One of the main issues in choosing alternatives is adaptability and suitability. There are numerous people (organizations) that promote using natives. I agree that natives are often a good choice. I do not believe that they are the only one. Think about "native" Florida where these plants developed. Today's estimated 30,000 miles of drainage and diversion have greatly changed the environment. Many natives require more attention and care than non-natives. The chance of future problems for natives is probably just as great as non-natives. Ficus did just fine until the Whitefly was introduced. The same could happen to natives should too few species become widely planted. There are many different tastes (suitability) and many different plants (adaptability) available. I believe a good example is the success of the Palm Cottage Gardens near Orlando. Dr. Nehrling developed this around 1900. Yes, before automatic irrigation and modern chemicals and fertilizers. In addition Dr. Nehrling's gardens became home to the first USDA experiment station in Florida. Plants introduced such as Indian hawthorne, bamboo, azalea and camellia were found to be suitable and adaptable to the rhythm of the Florida seasonal rainfall. The gardens website is: www.nehrlinggardens.org.

Water is going to be an ongoing item in the landscape. Estimates are that Florida currently has about 4 million acres of residential and commercial lawns. A tremendous amount of water is required to maintain these to any current standard. We receive about 50 inches of rain each year, however only 13 inches are added back to the underground aquifer. Over and inefficient watering are major problems. It is estimated by the St. Johns River Water Management District that Central Florida will outstrip the ability to provide a sustainable water supply beyond 2013. New water guidelines are proposed and are coming soon. The Saint Johns District will be the first, but all Water Management Districts will be adopting new rules. The first scheduled to go into effect in March 2009 include watering twice a week during Daylight Savings Time and once a week during Eastern Standard Time. No more than ¾" could be applied by any irrigation zone and no more than 1 hour run time on any zone. Our old habits and procedures are changing. Water use is projected to increase 10% each year nationwide. Changes must be made now to accommodate these demands. Florida projects to double to 36 million people by 2060. Current usage levels of 160 gallons per person per day (half for irrigation) cannot be sustained throughout that growth. Don't you agree change must (will) occur?

We have the tools to begin this process. The Water Management Districts are going to insist that we do. For instance, there is no restriction on micro-irrigation in any of the current proposals. Many local ordinances are now allowing rain barrels. I believe that our seasonal residents will find a new set of guidelines in place before their next visit. Be prepared and aware of change is the only advice I can give at this point.

Thanks to all for their comments and support. We all love our City; it's ambience, and hopefully its willingness to adopt necessary changes.