

NORTH COAST YARD & GARDEN

HORTICULTURAL NEWS AND INFORMATION FOR THE OHIO GARDENER

BY ROGER S. BOLGER
rsbolger@stratos.net

15 AUGUST 2006
VOLUME 1, NUMBER 1

IN MY GARDEN

Now that the high temperatures have left, we are spending more time in the garden and discovering the problems brought by the heat and humidity. Lawns seem particularly hard hit, with crabgrass, disease, and dormancy issues. Fungal diseases are attacking a number of annuals, perennials and woody plants. Plants are under stress from high temperatures, especially those newly planted this year. Signs of root damage from excessive rain are now appearing as well. There is a lot of work for the fastidious gardener.

Garden phlox (*Phlox paniculata*) and obedient plant (*Physostegia*) are in full bloom and putting on a wonderful show. Black-eyed susan (*Rudbeckia*) and coneflowers (*Echinacea*) are stunning, especially when used in masses. Joe Pye weed (*Eupatorium*) is in full bloom, attracting bumblebees, small butterflies called skippers, and a variety of beneficial predatory wasps. *Hosta plantaginea* is blooming, filling the night air with its soft floral fragrance. Fountain grass (*Pennisetum*) is thrusting up its fuzzy little flowers that resemble bottle brushes, or in the words of one named variety, 'Little Bunnies'.

Summersweet shrubs (*Clethra alnifolia*) are a-buzz with bumble-bees, but luckily their scent is strong enough that you don't have to put your nose in with the bees. Beautyberry (*Callicarpa*) is coming into bloom, preparing for the bright fall display

of lavender-purple berry clusters along its stems. Butterfly bush (*Buddleia*) is drawing monarchs, tiger swallowtails, and innumerable small butterflies. Glossy abelia (*Abelia grandiflora*) has its fragrant white flowers among the bronzy leaves. 'Nelly Moser' clematis is still putting out a couple of blooms as it winds through the crabapple tree. My new seven-son flower (*Heptacodium*) has its flower buds ready for their autumn show, and I can't wait to see them.

This has been a tough summer for vegetables. Roma tomatoes are producing prolifically, but have very short vines. Golden Jubilee tomatoes are leggy without many leaves, and have fruits that are smaller than average. Fourth of July tomatoes never recovered from the heavy rains and are producing only a few tiny fruits. Pepper plants are about half the size they were last year, and while fruiting is good, there are proportionately fewer fruits per plant. Cucumbers are doing well, but blossom set seems to have decreased during the heat wave. Watermelon vines are growing well with multiple flowers – I have never been able to get good fruit, so I am hoping this year will be the one!

The herb garden is a mixed success. Walker's Low catmint (*Nepeta faassenii* 'Walkers Low') died back soon after blooming in May due to all the rain, and basil got a slow start. Both have now begun to recover. Tarragon has all but died out. Rue never came back after the frost on May 22. Peppermint, spearmint and pennyroyal are having banner years.

FEATURED PERENNIAL

HOSTA PLANTAGINEA

It might be hard to understand why *Hosta plantaginea* is one of my favorite hostas. It does not have exciting variegation on its leaves; they are a plain but shiny grass green. They are larger than the average hosta, mounding to over two feet high and as much as four feet wide. The thick, waxy leaves are somewhat resistant to slug damage, especially because the plant continues to produce new leaves all summer. Like most hostas, it grows best in shade to part sun.



The most notable feature of this species is the intensely fragrant white flowers it produces in August. This is also the source of one of its common names, August Lily. The four inch long trumpet shaped flowers open around sundown and last until the next evening. The sweet fragrance, reminiscent of honeysuckle, travels several feet on still summer nights, and it is particularly enjoyable when they have been planted under an open bedroom window. Moths are drawn to these scented nocturnal flowers, and some gardeners

report hummingbirds enjoying the flowers during the day.

H. plantaginea makes a great ground cover for dark and dry shade. It is especially nice as a backdrop for showy variegated plants or flowers, as the continuous spread of green leaves makes the bright colors stand out. Each August, the fragrant blooms may take you by surprise as they add white sparkle to the shade and perfume the air. If you choose to divide your hostas, you will have plenty of divisions, so remember that *H. plantaginea* makes a great pass-along plant for your fellow gardeners.

To divide *H. plantaginea*, dig out sections of plants that have been in place for about three years. Ideally, hostas should be divided in spring when the shoots first poke their noses out of the warming soil. You may carefully dig out sections of shoots from the perimeter of the parent plant, but I prefer to dig the entire plant out and choose which division I'd like to replant in the hole. The root mass often reveals itself as several clusters of offsets, making it simple to see where to divide it to obtain robust starts.

H. plantaginea is a carefree plant, requiring no fertilizer, little water except in the driest of droughts, and does not crowd itself if left undivided for decades. The only maintenance required is to remove the brown leaves after a killing freeze in the fall, although I like to cut the old scapes (flower stalks) down as far as possible without damaging the leaves. Its origin in southern China makes it more adaptable to hot weather than other hostas. There are named varieties and hybrids with other species, but they lose the fragrance, need more care or specific conditions to perform as well as the plain species. It is hard to go wrong with this perennial which has been a garden favorite for two hundred years.

TURF TALES

DOLLAR SPOT AND BROWN PATCH

This is turning out to be another poor year for lawns. High temperatures, regular sprinkles from thunderstorms and nightly dew provided excellent conditions for fungal disease. Dollar spot and brown patch have been particularly rampant. To diagnose a fungus disease, check the grass on the borders of the brown patches. Completely brown grass blades will show no symptoms; check those blades that are still green but begin to show discoloration.

Dollar spot is easy to spot. It is named for the silver-dollar sized brown patches that first appear, although patches will get larger and even run together. Dollar spot produces hourglass-shaped lesions, with a light tan dried portion that spans the width of the blade and reddish brown borders at the top and bottom. On dewy mornings, the brown spots are covered with downy white mycelium that appear to be spider webs.

Brown patch may first infect grass under cooler conditions but produce noticeable damage only when temperatures remain between 80°F and 85°F. The primary characteristic is a dark brown “smoke ring” that surrounds the affected patch, which is usually roughly circular. Close examination of the grass blades shows red or brown irregular lesions that may be on the edges of the blade or toward the center.

Both of these diseases are easily controlled with lawn fungicides applied according to label instructions. Fertilize the lawn if it hasn't been fed in six weeks. If the soil is dry, I recommend giving the lawn ½ inch of water the day before fertilizing (this can be to water in the fungicide granules), followed by another ½ inch of water immediately after the fertilizer goes down. Don't wait for rain if the temperature is above 80°F – there is too much risk of burning the grass.

CRABGRASS

Crabgrass is an annual weed that dies in the fall, leaving behind thousands of seeds to sprout in the spring. The first fertilizer application of the year should contain a pre-emergent herbicide that kills seeds as they sprout. This control lasts through the early germination period, usually preventing major crabgrass problems throughout the year. Summer rains that come after the pre-emergent has worn off are typically followed by a week or more of dry weather, so any seeds that sprout usually dry up. This summer, frequent rain throughout July allowed crabgrass to take over lawns in a big way.

If your lawn has been taken over, there are several responses to consider. You could let the crabgrass do its thing until it dies in the fall, and be sure to use a pre-emergent crabgrass killer next spring. This may be unacceptable to your neighbors and others in your household.

Post-emergent crabgrass killers are available, but they can't easily kill crabgrass without doing minor damage to desirable turf. Use these products according to label instructions, applying them two or three times every five days or so. This should eliminate the crabgrass without doing permanent damage to the lawn. The good grass may show some yellowing, but it will recover with regular watering and fertilizing.

You might consider another application of pre-emergent herbicide to prevent additional seeds from taking root. This will also reduce sprouting of spurge and oxalis. Remember that an application of pre-emergent now will preclude you from starting grass seed in the fall, as the product will kill the new grass seeds as well as weed seeds. Siduron is a pre-emergent specific to crabgrass, but is more expensive and won't kill seedlings of any other weeds.

FEATURED WEED

YELLOW NUTSEGE

That yellow-green grassy weed that grows twice as fast as the lawn grass this time of year is yellow nutsedge or nutgrass (*Cyperus esculentus*). It is a perennial that comes back each year, and takes its name from the tiny nut-like tubers it produces on its roots. As a sedge, it has a stem with a triangular cross-section. It rarely has a chance to produce seed in mowed lawns, but it is quite happy to spread by its tubers or underground rhizomes. It usually starts from a seed in wet soils, but will spread to well-drained areas once established.



Nutsedge is very difficult to eliminate. The tubers are almost never removed by hand weeding, and they quickly resprout to form new plants. Few weed killers are effective against nutsedge, and those that kill it may not completely kill the tubers.

Glyphosate kills nutsedge in beds, but as it is a non-selective herbicide, you must be careful to keep it off the surrounding vegetation. Nutsedge in the lawn can be treated with post-emergent crabgrass killers with some success. Halosulfuron is the best selective control for nutsedge in

lawns, and is available under the name SedgeHammer. It may be hard to find, and is expensive, costing around twenty dollars for enough to treat one thousand square feet.

GARDEN CALENDAR

- Plant vegetables for fall harvest. Broccoli, cabbage, carrots, chard, kale, okra, peas and turnips may be planted in the last half of August.
- Harvest sweet corn when silks are brown and not too dry.
- Donate extra vegetables from your garden to a local food bank.
- If you grow heirloom flowers and vegetables, don't forget to start saving seeds from your best performing plants.
- Continue deadheading flowers and pulling weeds. Plants begin to look shabby in late summer, so it is important to keep your yard tidy.
- Fertilize roses for the last time before September. This will ensure that they harden off completely before frost.
- Begin sowing grass seed late in the month as temperatures begin to cool.
- Prune summer-flowering shrubs soon after blooming is finished.
- Shear hedges and shrubs as needed. Privet (*Ligustrum*), boxwood (*Buxus*), burning bush (*Euonymus alata*) and yew (*Taxus*) tolerate shearing.
- Rotate animal repellents so deer, rabbits, or other critters don't become accustomed to just one product.
- Replace hummingbird nectar in feeders every few days to avoid spoilage.

© 2006 ROGER S. BOLGER. NORTH COAST YARD AND GARDEN IS PUBLISHED TWICE A MONTH. ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION (24 ISSUES) IS \$20 FOR EMAIL DELIVERY, \$45 FOR US MAIL. SEND CHECK OR MONEY ORDER (MADE PAYABLE TO **ROGER S. BOLGER**) TO: 4200 WEST 229TH ST, FAIRVIEW PARK, OHIO, 44126