The Carolina Sandhills Gardener

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Cumberland County Announcements

- **September 30th- Growing Shiitake Mushrooms Class.** 12:00-1:30pm. Learn how to grow Shiitake mushrooms at home. Registration details are on our website.
- **October 4 - Cumberland County Extension Open House 9:00am - 1:00pm.** Learn about the services and programs offered through your local Cooperative Extension Office. Extension Master Gardeners will be on hand to answer questions and provide information on soil testing, pollinators, gardening, and much more. Attendees will receive a free plant (while supplies last). Kids activities include a free planting and pumpkin painting and/or coloring station.
- **October 11 - Bradford Pear Buy Back Program.** This event is sold out! Stay tuned for other similar opportunities in the future.
- **October 14th - Seed Savers Class.** Come learn how to collect, store and propagate seeds from your own landscapes and gardens. Registration information can be found on our website.

If you have suggestions on specific topics you would like to be covered in future workshops, please feel free to reach out to Allen West.

Soil Sample Info

Soil Samples are FREE through November, 2025.

The turnaround time for samples right now is approximately 2 weeks. Plan accordingly.

Plant Spotlight: *American Beautyberry (Callicarpa americana)*

By: Matthew Strickland

N.C. Cooperative Extension - Bladen County



American Beautyberry is a deciduous perennial that grows very well in southeastern NC. It produces vibrant purple fruits in the fall, from August to early October, but there are some cultivated varieties that produce pink, white, or cream-colored fruit. The flowers and fruit are only produced on new shoots. It is a native plant that can be found in thickets, stream edges, woodlands, and open meadows. Its growth form is a shrub and can grow from 3 to 8 feet tall depending on management and environmental conditions. It flowers during late spring and early summer. The desirable planting conditions would be in full sun to partially shaded areas and is tolerant across different soil types and soil pH levels.

American Beautyberry has benefits for our native animals and pollinators. It is resistant to browsing pressure from deer and rabbits. Deer and rabbits will browse the new herbaceous leaves and the woody stems. Songbirds and mammals will feed on the clusters of fruits as well. For humans, the foliage can be used to repel mosquitoes, ticks and fire ants. The berries can be used to make jellies and jams and can be eaten raw, but the raw flavor of the berry may not be desirable to some.

This shrub is suited for mass plantings, large landscapes, naturalized areas, pond margins, and container gardening. They seem to produce more fruit if several of the same type of shrubs are planted nearby. American beautyberry is also at home in a butterfly garden, children's garden, native garden, pollinator garden, and winter garden. The shoots can be pruned in the winter for maintenance or to cleanup preparing for new spring growth.

If you have any questions regarding American Beautyberry or other plants of interest, contact your local Extension Agent for resources and more information.

The Incredible, Edible Mushroom

By Mack Johnson

Horticulture Agent with N.C. Cooperative Extension - Robeson County

What is the common thread between oyster, turkey tail, chestnut, lion's mane, wine cap, morel and chicken of the woods? You guessed it, these are all mushrooms. Mycelium is the common thread they all share. Mycelium is the underground part of the mushroom we don't see, but does all the work to produce the fruit – the mushroom.

In years past, mushrooms often carried a mood-enhancing stigma, but the mushroom's popularity today tends to reference taste, health, and sustainability. With all the small farmers, homesteaders, and do-it-yourselfers, mushrooms interest continues to expand in phenomenal ways. Mushrooms have moved from the exotic specialties to mainstream in the last few decades.

The health benefits of mushrooms can differ slightly between different strains however most of our more common edibles offer copious health benefits. For instance, they are naturally very low in fat, sodium, and calories which make them heart healthy. They provide important minerals like selenium, copper, and potassium. The fact they are high in fiber and the potassium they provide supports healthy blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Mushrooms contain beta-glucans and other polysaccharides that help balance and stimulate immune response. Mushrooms are rich in the B vitamins such as niacin, riboflavin, and pantothenic acid, which supports energy metabolism and the function of our nervous systems. Consumers are increasingly seeking fresh local mushrooms for their culinary versatility and health benefits. This market demand and suitable growing conditions have made mushrooms one of the most promising niche crops.

Our North Carolina Sandhills region offers particularly good mushroom production conditions with our humid climate and abundant source of hardwood trees. With shiitake mushrooms being among the most popular to grow, log production is a traditional and fairly simple method of production. This method uses freshly cut hardwood logs – preferably oak, sweetgum, or red maple. Harvesting the logs during dormancy provides the best condition for mycelium growth. Optimum size for the logs will be 3-4 feet long and 4-6 inches in diameter. This size affords good production size as well as the physical ease of handling.

The process of inoculating the log is fairly simple. First drill holes in the logs starting 1 inch from the end and every 4 inches down the length of the log. Start the next row about 2 inches above the previous row and alternate the spacing so that you create a diamond pattern. A special tool is required to place the spawn-inoculated sawdust in the hole, but a newer method provides spawn in a hard woody plug that can actually be hammered into the drilled-out holes. With either method, the next step will involve dabbing hot wax to seal the inoculant in the log. The spawn run is the next phase, which requires patience because this is the period that you don't see anything happening, but the spawn is digesting the log and preparing to fruit. Be sure to keep your inoculated logs out of direct sun to prevent them from drying out. Logs need to stay above 30 percent moisture content for the mycelium to survive. Spraying the logs regularly or putting them under an automated sprinkler system providing an inch of water per week keeps the logs moist. In due time you will see the fruits of your labor, that is, the incredible, edible mushroom. Keep an eye on your local Extension office for any workshops offered in the future.

Lichen or Not...They Are There

Allen West

Horticulture Agent with N.C. Cooperative Extension - Cumberland County Center

This past week a client came into our Extension Office with some plant specimens he carried in a plastic grocery bag. He was concerned that a certain fungus he found on his shrubs was harming them. After a quick glance into the bag, I told the client, "Well I have good news, and I have more good news. The good news is this is not a disease and secondly, this is not harming your shrubs."

So what was this weird looking material on his shrub stems? It is an organism called Lichens. You might be asking why Lichens is in a "Pest Alert" section, when in actuality it is not a pest. Though not a pest, lichens are so often confused as being a pest, I thought I would include it in this article to make my fellow gardening and landscaping family aware.

Lichens (pronounced "lie-kens") may appear to be a mold or disease but is actually a combined symbiotic relationship between a fungus and a blue-green algae. The algae part of the relationship is what produces food for the organism through photosynthesis,while the fungus supplies a structure for water and minerals to be collected from the air. Because lichens do not have roots and get their minerals and water from the air, it in no way acts as a parasite to landscape plants. It does not rob the plant of moisture, nor does it cause injury to the stem allowing other pathogens to enter the plant. In other words, the only thing that the plant supplies the lichen is an undisturbed place to live.

Lichens can be found on every continent on earth and in every climate and altitude. It can be found at the coast of Florida, the mountains of Colorado and yes, the Sandhills of North Carolina. Lichens grow on undisturbed surfaces such as tree bark, rocks, metal, plastic and bare soil. Lichens usually fall within three categories, but the one we most associate with in the home landscape most often is called foliose lichens. They produce flat "leaf-like" layers (see picture below).

Because lichens are very sensitive to air pollution, finding them in one sense is a good thing, as it means the air quality is good enough at your home to support lichens. But with that said, lichens can sometimes be an indicator that a tree or shrub is under stress or growing slowly. For example, finding lichens on mature trees or shrubs is not usually anything to worry about. But if smaller and younger landscape trees and shrubs have lichens it can be an indicator that something is stunting its growth such as soil pH issues, nutrient deficiencies, not enough/too much sunlight, etc. Because lichens pose no harm, removing lichens is not helpful, but investigating the reason for their presence can be.

Chances are if you set this article down and go look closely at your landscape you will see lichens in several places. And if you do, don't panic, it is just a part of nature doing it's thing. If you do have concerns about lichens, can contact your local Cooperative Extension Agent for more information.

An example of a foliose lichen.

Lichens, along with other plant stress indicators should be investigated

Lichens on older or slow growing trees is usually of little concerned.

Red Wigglers For The Garden

Ashley Grubb

Area Horticulture Agent with N.C. Cooperative Extension - Hoke County Center

Do you know who some of my best gardening friends are? Worms! Red wigglers, to be more specific. They're the MVPs of my garden every season—and I think you might need some too! Red wigglers are great because they help create some of the best compost your plants will ever have, and they're relatively easy to maintain—even for a beginning gardener. They'll happily feed on your leftover kitchen scraps and the brown paper from almost every Amazon delivery, so you can feel good about turning waste into garden gold!

To start, all you'll need are two five-gallon buckets (check if they're food-safe if that's a concern), a lid with an optional screen that fits over the top, some shredded paper, and food scraps to create a cozy home for your new worm friends. You can also use two large Tupperware totes if you prefer that to a bucket system —the setup is the same.

To prepare for adding your worms, drill drainage holes in just one of the buckets. This will be the top bucket in your stack and will allow any liquid to drain into the bottom one. Over time, you may find worms and fine compost particles hanging out down there too. Place the bottom (hole-free) bucket on a flat surface and stack the top one inside it. Next, add a layer of damp bedding for the worms—this can be brown packing paper, shredded paper or newspaper, small pieces of cardboard, or coconut coir. Add water until it feels like a wringed out sponge.

Once the bedding is in place, you can add your worms. Worms can be purchased online, from bait shops, or even some garden centers. They'll feed on some of the bedding, but you'll also want to give them kitchen scraps to help them grow, reproduce, and produce compost. Feed them fruits, vegetables, peels, coffee grounds, etc., but avoid meat, dairy, oily foods, and citrus—these can smell bad or harm your worms. Chopping up scraps helps speed things up, but it's optional. Bury the scraps in the bedding and keep it moist. For best results, feed them small amounts at a time and wait until the previous scraps are gone before adding more. One more tip: worms dislike extreme temperatures, so keep them shaded and protected from freezing or overheating.

When the top bucket is full of finished compost, you can stack a new bucket with holes on top and restart the process so the worms migrate upward. Once they've moved, use the compost to feed your plants! If you'd rather not add another bucket, simply separate out a handful of worms, use the rest in your garden, and set the system up again. The liquid that drains into the bottom bucket also makes excellent compost tea.

Pecan Scab

By Bruce McLean

Horticulture Agent with N.C. Cooperative Extension - Columbus County Center

This year has been a tough one for pecan growers across the Southeast, from Georgia up through the Carolinas. Persistent rainfall has fueled a severe outbreak of Pecan Scab, a fungal disease caused by *Fusicladium effusum*, and it's taken a heavy toll on our pecan crops. The disease spreads through wind and rain, leaving telltale black spots on young leaves and developing nuts. In years like this one, with wet spells in May, June, and late July through early August, the conditions are perfect for Pecan Scab to thrive, and the results are devastating. Infected tissue (leaves, twigs, and nut shucks) dies off, leading to premature leaf drop, damaged twigs, and nuts that are small, misshapen, or even completely lost. For many growers, this means a significant portion of the harvest is unsalvageable.

Pecan Scab is no stranger to the Southeast, where our warm, humid climate provides the ideal environment for this fungus to flourish. Unlike drier regions like Texas, Oklahoma, Arizona, or California, where Pecan Scab is barely a concern, growers here deal with it to some degree almost every year. In a typical decade, we see a couple of years where the disease really takes hold, especially when spring or summer brings frequent rain. This year, unfortunately, we got hit with both — a wet spring that gave the disease an early start and a soggy, cloudy stretch in late summer that caused it to explode. The spores, which overwinter on old leaves, twigs, and shucks, get carried by wind and moisture to infect new growth. Once those black spots appear, any kind of moisture—rain, mist, or even heavy dew—helps the disease spread further. In severe cases, like we're seeing now, large lesions on the nut shucks can constrict the developing nut, leading to poor quality or complete crop failure.

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For large commercial orchards, there's some hope in fighting Pecan Scab. They can use specialized equipment like air blast sprayers to apply fungicides, reaching the upper branches of tall pecan trees. But for homeowners with a few trees in the backyard, this isn't a practical option. Spraying a 60-foot-tall tree is no small feat, and there are no effective soil-based fungicides for mature trees. So, what can the average homeowner do to protect their pecans? There are a few practical steps that can make a difference, even if they don't eliminate the problem entirely. First, focus on keeping your trees healthy. Proper fertilization is key to building strong, resilient trees that can better withstand disease pressure. A well-nourished tree is more likely to produce at least some pecans, even in a bad scab year. Second, clean up your orchard or yard in the winter after you've collected any usable nuts. Rake up fallen leaves, shucks, and nuts,and dispose of them to reduce the number of spores that can kickstart the disease in spring. If you're in a rural area, a controlled burn can be an effective way to get rid of this material—just be cautious and follow local regulations. Third, improve airflow around your trees. Prune them properly to open up the canopy and clear out any nearby "junk" trees or vines that might trap moisture and encourage fungal growth. Good airflow helps keep the foliage dry, which can slow the disease's spread.

pecanbreeding.uga.edu

If you're planning to plant new pecan trees, do your homework and choose varieties with strong resistance to Pecan Scab. Reputable pecan nurseries can guide you toward the best options—avoid settling for whatever's available at big box stores, as those trees may not be suited for our region's challenges. Many older trees, like the Stuart or Cape Fear varieties, were once considered resistant but struggle with modern scab strains. If you've got these in your yard, you'll likely see more disease in wet years like this one. It's important to have realistic expectations: in tough seasons, losses are inevitable, but in drier years, you can still enjoy a solid harvest.

Pecan Scab is a fact of life for Southeastern growers, and 2025 is a stark reminder of how quickly it can turn a promising crop into a disappointment. By taking proactive steps and planning ahead, you can minimize its impact and keep your trees producing for years to come. Hang in there, and here's hoping for better weather next season.