



Holiday cactus come in several different colors

Christmas Cacti Provide Holiday Color

The Christmas cactus (*Schlumbergera x buckleyi*) is a very popular houseplant that has amazingly beautiful flowers with gracefully arching stems. Christmas cacti are wonderful low maintenance indoor plants that, when blooming, provide great seasonal decoration for the holidays.

When caring for a Christmas cactus, place it near a bright, sunny window and keep the soil evenly moist.

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Unlike other cacti the Christmas cactus and close relations do not like hot, arid environments. In fact, these epiphytic succulents are native to the rainforests of southern Brazil and thrive in warm and humid climates. It is important to remember this when caring for a Christmas cactus, so they are not treated like common cacti or succulents. They cannot tolerate the same levels of sun or dry conditions that other cacti can. It's important to water these cacti more regularly but to also monitor that they are not overwatered.

When moved, such as when relocated from the store to a home or even from one location to another within the same home, it is common for these plants to drop flower buds. Still, many blooms and buds will hold on, providing beautiful shades of magenta, red, pink, orange, gold or white. Holiday cacti (Thanksgiving, Christmas or Easter) will reward the owner with blooms every year for many years if grown correctly.

When determining where to place this succulent in a home, remember that they should be kept by bright, indirect light. An east-facing window or bright bathroom or kitchen are ideal locations. Direct sunlight can cause bleaching and withering of the leaves. They also will thrive on a porch or patio in a semishaded position during the summer. The ideal growing temperature for these cacti is from 60 degrees Fahrenheit (15 degrees Celsius) to 70 degrees Fahrenheit (21 degrees Celsius). But they can handle a much wider range as long as they do not dry out.

When watering, a simple feel test is all that is needed. If the soil feels dry to the touch about 2 inches below the surface, then water. Plan to water about every two to three weeks indoors and one to three weeks outdoors depending on temperature and humidity. When the soil is sufficiently dry, soak the soil until water runs through the container's drainage holes. Place a tray underneath the container to catch the water. After 15 to 20 minutes, discard any excess water so that the container is not sitting in water. Watering is especially important to water well while the plant is flowering.

In order to produce bountiful flowers year after year, a balanced houseplant fertilizer can be used. Depending on the type chosen it can be applied as often as every two weeks during the spring and summer and once a month in the fall and winter months. Just remember to follow the label of the

fertilizer chosen. However, fertility is not the only factor to keep in mind with budding of your holiday cacti. These cacti are also triggered to bloom by long nights and chilly nighttime temperatures in the 50s. The easiest way to get a plant to bloom again if you have been growing it inside is to place it outdoors in October. Leave it outside and allow the progressively longer and cooler nights to initiate buds to form, but do not leave the plant out on a night when a freeze is predicted. Once you see little flower buds at the tips of the branches, move the plant into a bright window inside and keep the soil evenly moist.

For more information, please contact your local AgCenter parish office. <https://www.lsuagcenter.com/portals/it/find-your-agent>

*Mark Wilson
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Leaves will break down over time and enrich the soil of your garden beds.

Compost the Leaves That Fall in Your Backyard

It's that time of the year to dust off the rakes and begin cleaning up all the leaves that fall from our trees. As we drive around we'll see people burning and bagging tons of leaves and sticks from their yards. It always makes me wonder as I watch the smoke coming from these piles if it's actually smoke signals trying to communicate to us that we are wasting a very valuable and free resource. It wouldn't take much effort at all to turn those leaves into nutrient-filled compost to use in our gardens and flower beds.

Compost can improve aeration of soil, root penetration and water infiltration. It can make clay soils easier to work and helps sandy soils retain more water. Plus it's an environmentally sound practice in that it keeps the bags of leaves out of the landfill.

There are many different types of composters that can help you create this very valuable product. Of course, there are composters that can be purchased from many home and garden centers. But for the true do-it-yourself person there are those that you can create yourself. The simplest and most inexpensive thing you can do is just make a pile in your backyard. This works well enough if you don't mind the appearance of an uncontained compost mound in your yard. Just find a good location and pile your yard waste in a mound about 3 feet tall and 3 feet square. Then cover the pile with a layer of soil. It will keep moisture for the microorganisms and soil animals working to make compost.

It's best to have two piles. After the first pile is large enough, stop adding organic material and let it work. In the meantime, add your wastes to the second pile. Make sure the pile stays moist, especially if it is not covered with soil. You can turn the pile to speed composting. Compost should be ready in three to four months if a good compostable mixture of organic materials is used and the pile is turned regularly, or in about one year if you don't turn the pile.

I realize that many of you don't want to have just a pile of compost sitting in your backyard. You still can compost without having to go purchase the store-brought composters. Composters can easily be made with items like an old trash can, cinder blocks, wire mesh or wood.

One last thing: I've heard people complain that composting can have an offensive odor. Well, it can smell bad if you keep it too wet or add organic material that shouldn't go into the pile. So, if you are interested in going "green," try composting. Just give me a call, and I'll be glad to head you in the right direction, whether it's how to build your own, how to keep the pile from having an odor, or what should and shouldn't go into the pile.

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American robin on a native holly. Photo by Norman Winter

Plant Trees and Shrubs During Cold Months

Winter is a great time to get outside and get things done in the garden. We are very fortunate here in the South to have good weather during the winter months for gardening, and it is an excellent time to plant trees and shrubs in the landscape.

Although deciduous trees and shrubs are in their dormancy, roots are still actively growing. Planting during December, January and February provides plants with several months to develop a strong root system before they put out a new flush of leaves and flowers in spring.

The structure of trees and shrubs in our lawns and gardens is very apparent this time of year. Dead branches, low-hanging branches and branches that cross one another are visible now and should be removed. Take this opportunity to trim your trees and shrubs. Removal will be much easier without the additional weight of leaves.

As retail nurseries begin clearing out Christmas trees and merchandise, they will be bringing in a new stock of woody trees and shrubs. Tropical plants will be available later in the warmer season when they are less likely to be damaged by colder temperatures.

The National Arbor Day Foundation has started the Time for Trees initiative to highlight how “trees clean our air, protect our drinking water, create healthy communities and feed the human soul.” Founded by J. Sterling Morton in 1872 in Nebraska City, Nebraska, where an estimated 1 million trees were planted, Arbor Day is celebrated every year. In 2021 it will be celebrated in most of the country on April 30. On this day, individuals are encouraged to plant trees.

Louisiana celebrates Arbor Day on the third Friday of January. The LSU AgCenter Botanic Gardens at Burden will hold its annual Arbor Day event on Jan. 23 from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Free and open to the public, this event

will feature educational talks on native trees given by experts from the LSU AgCenter. You and your family can plant a tree while there and get GPS coordinates so you can come back and visit “your” tree and watch it grow for generations to come.

When deciding what trees and shrubs to purchase and plant, it is best to sit down and consider the year-round interest of those plants. A great design will have beauty and interest in each season. That can include evergreen plants, flowering plants and deciduous plants that have excellent fall foliage change.

Evergreen trees and shrubs provide year-round greenery and are popular in almost every landscape design. Some good, large evergreen trees include live oaks (*Quercus virginiana*), Southern magnolias (*Magnolia grandiflora*), Leyland cypress trees (*Cupressus × leylandii*) and American holly trees (*Ilex opaca*).

The Southern magnolia has fragrant white flowers in late spring to midsummer, and in winter the female American holly trees sport gorgeous red berries that attract birds and other wildlife.

Some medium-sized evergreen trees are the Southern wax myrtle (*Morella cerifera*), camphor tree (*Cinnamomum camphora*) and red bay (*Persea borbonia*).

You can choose from several small evergreen trees with many different functions. Some have flowers and put on a display in the late fall into early spring. These include the camellia (*Camellia japonica*) and camellia sasanqua (*Camellia sasanqua*).



Loquats are great evergreen trees with sweetly scented flowers in late autumn.

Other fragrant flowering trees include loquat (*Eriobotrya japonica*), banana shrub (*Michelia figo*) and sweet olive (*Osmanthus fragrans*). Other trees — including the Burford Chinese holly (*Ilex cornuta 'Burfordii'*), yaupon holly (*Ilex vomitoria*) and eastern red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*) — provide ecosystem services such as wildlife food.

Compared to evergreen trees, deciduous trees have a much larger selection for use in Louisiana. Some large deciduous trees with good fall foliage change that are also great as shade trees for the landscape are American beech (*Fagus grandifolia*), bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*), basswood (*Tilia americana*), pecan (*Carya illinoensis*), tulip tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis*) and cucumber magnolia (*Magnolia acuminata*).



Chinese pistache is an excellent medium sized deciduous tree for excellent fall foliage.

Some outstanding small, spring-flowering deciduous trees are the fringe tree (*Chionanthus virginicus*), flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida*), Taiwan cherry (*Prunus campanulata*), saucer magnolia (*Magnolia X soulangeana*), parsley hawthorn (*Crataegus marshallii*), redbud (*Cercis Canadensis*) and silverbell (*Halesia diptera*).

Other deciduous trees with outstanding fall foliage change are the American hornbeam or ironwood (*Carpinus caroliniana*), hop-hornbeam (*Ostrya virginiana*), swamp red maple (*Acer rubrum Drummondii*), Japanese maple (*Acer palmatum*), southern sugar maple (*Acer barbatum*), green ash (*Fraxinus pennsylvanica*), sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*), Chinese pistache (*Pistacia chinensis*) and many oak species, such as shumard oak (*Quercus shumardii*), nuttall oak (*Quercus nuttallii*), white oak (*Quercus alba*) and post oak (*Quercus stellata*).

Planting trees is a great way to leave a lasting legacy for generations to come to enjoy. In my humble opinion, trees are the key to combating climate change by conserving energy, sequestering carbon and reducing the overall concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.

Consider this proverb: "The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second-best time is now."

Heather Kirk-Ballard, Ph.D.
Consumer Horticulture Specialist



Checklist for December, January and February



Leeks

December

1. In the vegetable garden: Plant onions sets, such as leeks and shallots, this month. Harvest bunching onions. Store vegetable seeds in the refrigerator to keep them viable (able to germinate). Store in tightly fitted plastic or glass containers.
2. In the lawn: Soil tests should be conducted every so often to check soil nutrient levels. If your soil tests indicate the need for lime, this is a good time of year to add it.
3. In the landscape beds: Keep winter weeds out of beds. Transplant alyssum, columbine, daffodil, dianthus, foxglove, hollyhock, larkspur, lobelia, narcissus, pansy, snapdragons and sweet William this month. Protect the roots and rhizomes of tropical plants by spreading a 4-to-6-inch layer of mulch around the base of the plant.

4. Trees and shrubs: Heavily mulch cold-sensitive trees and plants and cover them in extended periods of below-freezing weather. Winter is a good time to plant trees and shrubs. Water-in newly planted trees, but established trees will not need to be watered this month.
5. Fruits: Heavily mulch citrus trees to protect them from freezing temperatures. Cover young, tender citrus trees by constructing a simple frame extending above the leaves and cover with clear plastic. Make sure the cover does not touch tender leaves, and place the cover during the day to trap radiant heat coming up from the ground.



Pine straw mulch

January

1. In the vegetable garden: Cool-season vegetables and herbs tolerate freezing temperatures but small seedlings can be affected. Cover tender growth if you are expecting freezing temperatures with frost cloth, also known as reemay. If your vegetables need a boost of fertilizer, side-dress with a teaspoon of complete fertilizer placed a couple of inches from the base of the plant.
2. In the lawn: If you over-seeded with annual ryegrass, mow regularly to keep the lawn looking tidy. If winter weeds are bad, it is safe to apply broad leaf weed killer following label directions, or hand pull them.
3. In the landscape beds: Keep winter weeds in check by applying mulch at a 2-to-4-inch depth. Pine straw, leaves and pine bark are all excellent choices. Plant chilled tulips and hyacinths into the garden this month.
4. Trees and shrubs: This is a great time to plant trees and shrubs while temperatures are down. This is also a good time to relocate established trees and shrubs that you want moved elsewhere in the yard.

Be sure to go out a foot or more from the trunk of the tree or shrub to get an adequate root ball. Water newly transplanted trees in well to help encourage new root growth.

5. Fruit: Cover tender fruit trees, such as citrus, when temperatures are set to drop into the mid-20s overnight. Wrap or drape the plants with canvas or another type of fabric extending all the way to the ground. Place the cover on trees during the day to trap radiant heat coming up from the soil. Fertilize citrus at the end of January to early February. Apply 1 to 1 ½ pounds of 8-8-8 or 13-13-13 per year of tree. Year one equals 1 to 1 ½ pounds, year two equals 2 to 3 pounds and year three equals 3 to 4 ½, and so on.

February

1. In the vegetable garden: Plant warm-season vegetables late this month to decrease the chance of disease and insect problems. Be prepared to cover plants in freezing temperatures. Cut seed potatoes with a couple of eyes about the size of a golf ball and plant 4 inches deep and 12 inches apart. Corn planted in late this month will have few earworms.
2. In the lawn: Time to relax and rejuvenate. Perform lawn equipment maintenance this month in preparation for the spring and summer. Dormant sodding can be done this month if you have new construction or need to stabilize bare patches in the lawn. The warm-season turf is dormant and will be brown but will green up in spring.
3. In the landscape beds: Fertilize Louisiana irises and calla lilies and other fall-planted spring-flowering bulbs and cool-season annuals with a slow-release granular fertilizer this month. Prune repeat-blooming roses.
4. Trees and shrubs: Prune your roses on or around Valentine's Day and begin a preventative spray program, alternating fungicides for blackspot and powdery mildew. Fertilize spring-blooming trees and shrubs.
5. Fruit: Time to fertilize fruit trees and shrubs, including apples, peaches, citrus, figs, blueberries and blackberries. Dormant cuttings from fig trees can be taken from 1-year-old growth and stored at 40 degrees for a month or so before rooting in moist media.

*Heather Kirk-Ballard, Ph.D.
Consumer Horticulture Specialist*

General Winter Vegetable Planting Tips

Let's make the most of December's garden and start the New Year off right by following best management practices to get the most out of our fruit and veg crops.

December is the last month I think of as actual winter. January and February to me are very early spring. So, in this last month of winter here are a few to-do items to help keep the garden active!



Strawberry plants covered to protect them from below freezing temperatures.

December

- Scout lettuce, strawberries and all cole crops for insects. Aphids, slugs, snails and worms tend to cause problem in the winter garden. Insecticides such as horticulture oil, insecticidal soap and Bifenthrin products (Ortho Bug –B-Gon Max) work great for aphid control. Insecticides that kill worms and loopers include Sevin, Bt (Dipel) and Spinosad. Snails and slugs are best controlled with baits. Iron phosphate baits are safest for pets. Early evening is when these pests feed. You want the baits to smell strong, so apply baits in the early evening for best results. If you have a lot of slug and snail problems, remove mulch from around the base of plants. This gives them fewer hiding spaces.
- Till and hip rows in the garden now for January-planted crops. Early January can be very wet.
- Plant onion sets. Choose sets that are thin, the size of a pencil or thinner. Thicker plants tend to bolt in cold weather and set seed rather than forming bulbs.
- Cover blooming strawberry plants when temperatures drop below 32 degrees Fahrenheit. Plants not in bloom? No need to cover.
- Order spring vegetable seed now if you want first pick of the great varieties. Wait too long and other gardeners will order all the good varieties.



Red Burgundy onions

January

- Onions can be planted from mid-December to early January. In early January, continue to plant onion sets. Bulbing onion varieties that perform well include but are not limited to: Texas Grano, Mr. Buck, Texas 1015Y, Pinot Rouge, Red Burgundy and Miss Megan.
- Mid-January through the end of February: Transplant broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, chard, kale and lettuce into the garden. You can also direct-seed carrots, radishes, turnips and other rooting vegetable crops.
- Mid-January through mid-February: Plant Irish potatoes into the garden. Cut the potatoes a few days before planting. Cut larger potatoes in quarters and smaller potatoes in half. This larger size helps reduce rot. It doesn't matter if the potato pieces face up down or sideways. They will grow.
- Vegetable growers in south Louisiana should start their tomato, eggplant and pepper transplants mid-January. North Louisiana vegetable growers should wait until the end of January or the beginning of February. It takes between eight and 10 weeks to germinate and grow into a decent-sized tomato, pepper and eggplant seedling for the garden. Keep seedlings in a warm and BRIGHT area. One week prior to transplanting, move the seedlings outside to harden off.

February

- Continue to transplant broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, chard, kale and lettuce transplants into the garden. Successive planting, or planting a portion of a row or a new row, every two weeks ensures a steady harvest.

- Direct-seed beets, turnips, mustard, parsley, radishes, lettuce, snap beans and Irish potatoes.
- Pull winter weeds. Hand-pull them or cultivate with a tiller or hoe. Get weeds out of the garden. Small insects like thrips like to hide here and get your spring crops later. Pre-emergent herbicides like Dual and Treflan are wonderful technology that can make gardening easy, especially in larger gardens. To control grasses in the garden use Poast or other herbicides with the active ingredient sethoxydim to kill grass and not broadleaf weeds.
- Leave space for spring crops, which will go into the garden in March and April. If you have not pulled up rows, be sure to get it done at the first chance of dry weather. Spring is here!

Enjoy the Garden,

*Kathryn "Kiki" Fontenot, Ph.D.
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Winter Turfgrass Management

The dormant season for turfgrass begins in December

Most lawns should be dormant or at least close to this stage by Christmas. Because lawns are not actively growing, fertilizer applications are not needed during the winter. Most lawn fertilization for growth should have stopped on home lawns by late summer (late August to very early September for St. Augustinegrass and centipedegrass).

Nitrogen fertilizer on dormant to semidormant St. Augustinegrass, centipedegrass and zoysiagrass lawns can lead to increased brown patch and winter kill. Also, nitrogen applications during this time have a greater potential for leaching or movement into nontarget areas.

Soil sampling and pH adjustments

I'm a big believer in soil testing. If your lawn did not perform well last growing season or you just want to get a quick check on soil pH, get the soil tested. Winter is an excellent time to collect soil samples and submit them for analysis.

Samples should be a composite of soil collected from 3 to 4 inches deep at various places around the lawn. Mix well and reduce the sample to about a pint of soil and take it to the LSU AgCenter Extension Service office in your parish or to a participating garden center. Make sure to specify the type of grass you are growing on the soil test form.



Lawn burweed germinates in lawns fall and produces painful stickers in the spring.



Annual bluegrass seedhead



Catchweed bedstraw is a sticky winter weed that attaches to pants and pets.

Soil samples submitted to the LSU AgCenter result in a wealth of information concerning the overall fertility of your soil. If results of the soil test indicate the soil pH is too acidic, lime will be prescribed in the soil test recommendations. Sulfur may be prescribed for soils that are too alkaline. Winter is the best time to apply

lime or sulfur so that it can be activated by for the growing season next spring and summer. The correct soil pH is extremely important and has everything to do with nutrient availability and fertilizer performance.

Turf establishment

Postpone any permanent warm-season turfgrass seeding until next spring. Soil and air temperatures will be too cold for germination and growth.

Sod, such as St. Augustinegrass and centipedegrass, can be laid during winter and established successfully during the spring. But remember to maintain good moisture to prevent the sod from dying. Establishment of sod is easiest, however, when sodding is delayed until the middle of spring, well after spring green-up.

Large patch disease (formerly brown patch)

Large patch disease can come and go throughout the winter if the weather is mild. Treatment with fungicides containing myclobutanil, propiconazole, pyraclostrobin, and triticonazole and azoxystrobin will reduce the spread of large patch. Damage from large patch will slow spring green-up, and diseased areas will remain unsightly until warmer spring weather conditions help with turfgrass recovery. These diseased areas become more prone to weed infestations.



Mock strawberry

Winter weed management

Broadleaf weeds, such as clover and lawn burweed (sticker weed) and annual bluegrass infesting St. Augustinegrass, centipedegrass and zoysiagrass and dormant bermudagrass, can be suppressed with a late fall followed by a winter application of atrazine herbicide. The window for these atrazine applications is from October to early March. Herbicides containing a three-way mixture of 2,4-D plus dicamba plus mecoprop (trimec-type herbicides) can be used for

winter broadleaf control on the same lawns that were sprayed with atrazine. MSM (metsulfuron) works well on lawn burweed and is highly effective on clovers and false garlic. Weed-and-feed products can be substituted as your first application of fertilizer during the early spring.

When it comes to managing lawn burweed specifically, don't wait until the stickers show up in April to treat. It's too late then. Spray burweed in early November with products mentioned previously. Repeat these applications in February and March.



Wild geranium is a common winter broadleaf infesting lawns.

When should you resume fertilizing your lawn

Lawns may show signs of green-up in southern Louisiana in late February. Do not push turfgrass growth with fertilizer at that time! Fertilizer applied too early will feed winter weeds and will result in lush turfgrass growth that is more susceptible to injury from late frosts and increased levels of large patch disease. Lawns may be fertilized in the New Orleans area by late March, but delay fertilizing central Louisiana lawns until April. Consider fertilizing lawns in north Louisiana around mid-April.

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Sooty Molds

Sooty molds are a result of nonplant pathogenic fungi that grow superficially as a thin black layer on leaves, fruit, twigs and stems of various crop plants or trees. The fungi grow on the honeydew produced by insects with piercing-sucking mouthparts. The insects, including aphids, leafhoppers, mealy bugs, psyllids, scale insects and whiteflies, pierce the plant tissue with their stylets and feed on plant sap. While continuously feeding, these insects ingest a large volume of sap fluid into their bodies, which is not entirely digested. After extracting nutrients from the sap, these insects excrete excess water and sugars from their bodies in the



Figure 1: Aphids feeding on a weed host.

form of a sticky, sugary substance called honeydew. Most of the time, these insects feed on young, tender new growth and the honeydew drops below on all plant parts, including leaves, fruit, twigs and stems. Additionally, the honeydew covers understory vegetation, concrete surfaces, sidewalks, furniture, parking lots, etc., under host plants infested by sap-sucking insects.

Sooty molds are saprophytic fungi with dark, powderlike spores that break down honeydew. Abundance of sooty molds lead to formation of a thin, black layer. There are several species of sooty molds, but the most common ones are *Capnodium* spp. and *Fumago* spp. Sooty molds do not directly affect the host plant on which they reside but can inhibit the photosynthetic ability of the plant by covering leaves, twigs, fruit and stems. Under extreme conditions plants entirely covered with sooty mold may lose vigor and be predisposed to other plant pathogens. Plant growth may also be retarded, and yields can be significantly reduced. The aesthetic value of the plants covered with sooty mold is greatly reduced.

All plant species that are hosts for sap-sucking insects with the piercing and sucking type of feeding are affected with sooty molds. Some of the common landscape plants heavily affected by sooty mold are azaleas, camellias, citrus, crape myrtles, magnolias,



Figure 2: Whiteflies feeding on the underside of a holly leaf.

oleander, pears, pine, roses, sago palms and viburnum. Hedges, small bushes or other plants, such as boxwoods, Indian hawthorn and ground covers, get sooty mold if the trees under which they are planted are infested with these insects. This happens when the honeydew from insects high in the canopy of trees drops on the vegetation underneath.

Managing sooty molds is very simple. Keep insects, such as aphids, mealy bugs, scale insects and whiteflies, in check. Once the insect problem is solved there will be no new sooty mold occurrence. The existing sooty mold infestation dries out after some time and easily sloughs off the infested areas.



Figure 3: Crape myrtle bark scale on a crape myrtle trunk.



Figure 4: Crape myrtle leaves covered with sooty mold.



Figure 5: Citrus fruit and leaves covered with sooty mold.



Figure 6: Honeydew present on the upper surface of crape myrtle leaves.



Figure 7: Honeydew present on the upper surface of a rose leaf.



Figure 8: An Indian hawthorn covered with sooty mold planted under a large tree infested with aphids.

Pressurized water can be used to wash off the sooty molds. Care should be taken while using pressurized water because it may damage the plant parts.

Insect infestations are generally controlled with insecticides, insecticidal soaps or horticultural oils. Before applying any kind of chemical pesticide, it is very important to identify the insect properly. Samples of plants infested with insect pests may be taken to your extension agent for identification. Consult with your local extension agent on the use of chemicals for managing insects. The LSU AgCenter Plant Diagnostic Center is also available to diagnose your plant health problems.

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Figure 9: Mulch covered with sooty mold under a crape myrtle tree heavily infested with crape myrtle bark scale.

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