



McLennan County Master Gardeners

Horticulture Newsletter

Spring, 2005

<http://mcmg.aspfreeserver.com>

On the calendar...

- March 20: Gardeners' Gathering
- May 14: McLennan County Master Gardeners Plant Sale

FROM THE MASTER GARDENERS:

Want to know more about **Firewise Landscaping**? Two local master gardeners have attended the Firewise Landscape Training Class sponsored by the Forest Service and Texas Cooperative Extension. They can discuss ways to make your home less susceptible to fire by sensible landscape planning.

Want to know about the **Earth-Kind environmental landscape management program**? This concept gives maximum protection for the environment. There is an emphasis on Earth-Kind roses. We have an EarthKind Rose Specialist.

Want to increase your number of plants through home **propagation**? Two members are Propagation Specialists trained by Texas Cooperative Extension.

Need a visual program for your group? We have a **slide program** of "Peek into Some McLennan Co. Master Gardeners Yards" - made during 2004 by the local Master Gardener Association.

Call the Extension Office for additional information at **757-5180**.

GARDENERS' GATHERING

Carleen Bright Arboretum, 9001 Bosque Blvd.

Sunday, March 20

1:00 to 4:00 p.m.

Free, Open to Public

Representatives from many gardening groups will be present to share information.

EARTHKIND ROSE TESTING

The McLennan County Master Gardeners with TSTC golf landscape management students have prepared beds and planted 45 roses in a test rose garden. The roses are available for public viewing at the **TSTC Landscape Department area, 3801 campus Drive**. Call 867-4867 for directions.

The rose test program has been developed by Texas A&M horticulture specialists and is based on their research. The rose beds have been prepared with these guidelines:

- ...Soil test
- ...Preparation of soil
- ...Eight hours sun daily
- ...Good air movement
- ...Drip irrigation
- ...Compost
- ...Mulch—3-4 inches
- ...No fertilizer, pesticides, or fungicides
- ...No pruning

This rose testing program has coast to coast potential with the help of rose societies, arboretums, master gardeners and others. The public is encouraged to participate by becoming a member of the "EarthKind Rose Brigad as dedicated amateurs providing valuable information to research at Texas A&M. There is a specific list of roses to test and guidelines for the rose brigade. For more information, contact McLennan Co. Extension office at 757-5180.

SUPERSTAR PROJECT AT CARLEEN BRIGHT ARBORETUM

The Master Gardeners are developing a Superstar demonstration bed at the Carleen Bright Arboretum in Woodway to show how these outstanding plants work in a landscape setting. These plants have been designated by Texas A&M as tolerating hot dry summers, diseases, and insects, while providing beauty with minimal care and minimal reliance on chemical pest control.

Retaining walls have been installed by the Master Gardeners and interns, fill soil added, and planting will be completed soon.

Master Gardeners will be present March 20, 1-5 p.m. at the Arboretum's Gardeners' Gathering to share information about Texas Superstars and other gardening-related topics.

PESTICIDE SAFETY

Before using any pesticide, carefully read all the instructions on the container. Follow instructions carefully, such as wear protective clothing during mixing or spraying. Take the necessary precautions when applying pesticides to avoid being exposed to chemicals.

Mix pesticides in a well-ventilated area or outdoors. Avoid chemical contact with your skin, and do not breathe chemical vapors.

Apply the pesticides at the proper rate. If you use less chemical than is prescribed, it may not control the pests well; if you use more than is recommended, you may damage the plant or leave too much residue on the fruit.

Store chemicals in a secure area away from pets and children. Prepare only the amount required for one application. Dispose of any unused, diluted sprays and empty pesticide containers properly. Store pesticides in their original containers.

From Texas Cooperative Extension's
"Homeowners Fruit and Nut Spray Guide"

Warning: Never use a herbicide in the same sprayer used for insect and disease control. Keep a separate sprayer for each.

BULBS

If you are new to the magic world of growing things, by all means, start gardening with bulbs. For ease of planting and care, low initial cost, and sure results, these flowers win hands down. Bulbs are planted and covered and that is it - no pruning, weeding and generally, no bugs to battle. The makings for the flowers are already in the bulbs and all you do is plant them.



Bulbs are among the earliest bloomers in most gardens. The bulbs blooming now (daffodils, hyacinths, tulips) were planted in the fall. Bulbs that bloom in the fall are planted in the spring. Most summer flowering bulbs are planted after danger of frost is past. It is possible to have some kind of bulb blooming almost all year.

Most spring-flowering bulbs require prolonged cold weather in winter in order to break their dormancy. In this area, the most reliable way to provide that cooling is to store them in the vegetable crisper in the refrigerator for at least six weeks before planting. They may be planted from September until the ground freezes.

Summer flowering bulbs can be planted soon. Among these are amaryllis, begonias, fall crocus, elephant ear and caladiums (plant in May), lilies, gladiolus (their bulbs are called corms), ranunculus.

Prepare soil; add organic matter to loosen. A low-nitrogen fertilizer, bone meal, or bulb booster can be mixed with the soil. Check directions as to depth to plant and how to place bulb in the hole (usually with point up). Firm soil over bulb and water thoroughly. Add 2" mulch to maintain moisture and hinder weed growth. Planting of masses of bulbs (25 or more) is more impressive and showy than a single bloom. Select good healthy bulbs as size and quality have a direct relationship to the flower quality and plant health. After they bloom, remove spent blooms but leave foliage to die back. This allows the bulbs to mature and store energy for the next season's growth. Some naturalizing varieties will bloom year after year, giving a vivid array of color to your home and garden.

MULCH

Mulching is one of the simplest and most beneficial practices you can use in the garden. Mulch is simply a protective layer of a material that is spread on top of the soil. It retards weed growth, maintains a more even soil temperature, conserves moisture, protects the soil from erosion and provides a "finished" look to the garden.



Mulches can either be organic or inorganic. Inorganic mulches such as gravel, plastic or roll-type materials will absorb heat which may be a problem in the summer. They may stay in place more readily, thus be harder to remove if you decide to change your plans. Organic mulches such as bark, compost, straw, and leaves will improve the condition of the soil as they slowly decompose. This returns their nutrients into the soil which helps loosen the soil and improves root growth as well as the water-holding capacity of the soil. It provides an ideal environment for earthworms and other beneficial soil organisms.

Lawn clippings make a good mulch source as long as the lawn had not been treated with herbicides. Fallen leaves are usually readily available. It helps to chop or mow the leaves into smaller sizes so that they can decompose faster. Newspaper can be used as a mulch to keep down weeds. Cover the edges of three or four sheets of paper with soil so that they won't blow away. Compost makes wonderful mulch if you have a good supply. Bark chips and composted mulches are available in bags (and sometimes in bulk) at the garden centers. Smaller bark chips are easier to spread, especially around small plants. Hay and straw are often used in the vegetable garden. All of these will eventually break down to improve the condition of the soil and make a neat finish to the garden bed in the meantime.

Mulching helps prevent rapid soil temperature changes. A mulched soil in summer will be cooler than an unmulched adjacent soil. Do not use organic mulches too early in spring. If applied to cold garden

soils, the soils warm up more slowly and crop maturity is reduced. If adding mulch to existing perennial beds, wait until the soil has warmed completely. Winter mulches to protect plants should be loose material such as straw, hay, or similar materials that will help insulate the plants without being too heavy in possible icy weather.

Mulches are most effective when applied from one to four inches deep. Remove weeds before spreading the mulch and leave an inch or so space next to the plants to help prevent diseases which may develop from excessive humidity. At the end of the season, turn organic mulches under to improve the soil's physical condition.

SPRING LAWN CARE

Springtime is an important time for your lawn. Turf is just awakening from winter and doesn't need a lot of added nutrition. Wait to fertilize until after you have mowed twice. Set the mower blade for the first mowing about a $\frac{1}{4}$ in. to $\frac{1}{2}$ in. lower than normal grass height to promote top growth as well as spreading. The dry dormant clippings will fall through the turf as a barrier to weed seedlings.



The second cutting should be at normal mower blade setting. For St. Augustine lawns normal blade setting is around $2\frac{1}{2}$ to 3 in. while Bermuda grass lawns will do fine at $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 in. in height. Complete the second mowing by the middle of April in time to fertilize your lawn. Fertilizing too early wastes nutrients on weeds.

Turf does best with small doses of nutrients applied over time. A slow release product works best. Don't over fertilize. Apply only $\frac{1}{2}$ to one lb. of nitrogen per 1000 sq. ft. of turf area. Over fertilization promotes too much growth and increases the risk for disease.

Mowing is most important to keeping a healthy lawn. Most turfs will look their best and be healthier if mowed every four to five days. This pattern of mowing will encourage a thick green turf and eliminate weeds. Clippings are converted to nutrients and stress never becomes a factor since you never remove too much in one cutting.

SPRINGTIME IN THE VEGETABLE GARDEN

This is when it all comes together. The soils in the garden have been aerated and are moist and loose. The cool season veggies like onions, broccoli, carrots, lettuce, cabbage, greens and potatoes are well on their way and growing. The warm-weather loving veggies like corn and green beans that we gambled on with early plantings are popping out of the ground. The warmth of the sun and the songs of the birds make the vegetable garden the place to be.

APRIL:

***Early April is a good time to plant those warm weather veggies like beans, cucumbers, peppers, squash, and tomatoes. Stagger planting times on veggies to spread harvest time.

***The warmer-weather loving veggies are still tender and need to be protected from unexpected frost, so be prepared.

***The young seedlings planted directly into the soil need to be thinned to assure plenty of room for good productive healthy plants.

***Mulch the garden now to control weeds.

***The latter part of April is a good time to plant melons.

MAY:

***The heat loving veggies such as southern peas and okra can be planted.

***The harvest season is beginning for many vegetables and by keeping the plants well picked more production is encouraged.

***It is time to watch plants for disease and insects. A quick response can insure healthy productive plants.

***Finish any mulching to minimize weed control and help maintain consistency in soil moisture levels.

JUNE:

***Enjoy the harvest time.

***The "not so much fun" things are important. Control weeds and be alert for insects and diseases.

***The rising temperatures could mean drier conditions and require additional watering. Water is critical for good production. Minimize the number of times you water by watering deep. Soon that first tomato and first harvest of corn will make it all worth while.

TEXAS SUPERSTAR PERENNIALS

The Texas Superstar program was discussed in the last horticulture newsletter. These hardy, disease resistant plants have proven to be Texas-tough plants.

On the list of Superstars are eight perennial plants. These plants will come back season after season, unlike annuals which must be replanted each year. Thus the same plant can be enjoyed year after year without having to spend money for new landscape materials. During mid to late winter, they will need pruned back so that the new growth can begin when spring arrives. Otherwise, there is very little maintenance to these perennials.

These Superstar perennials range from a ground cover, the Dwarf Mexican Petunia (*Ruellia brittoniana*), to the three large hibiscus varieties, 'Moy Grande', 'Flare', and 'Lord Baltimore'. These sun-loving plants will grow to 4' in height with blooms ten to twelve inches across. 'Moy Grande' with its rose-pink blooms has the largest flowers of any hardy perennial. If you want to impress the neighbors, try one (or all) of the hibiscus varieties.

The Blue Princess Verbena is a vigorous grower in full sun. The butterflies and hummingbirds are attracted to its lavender blue blossoms. It spreads about 4 feet wide and 12 inches tall.

Two varieties of phlox are on the Superstar perennial list. 'Victoria' grows 24-36 inches tall and is heat and drought tolerant with magenta flowers in summer. 'John Fanick' phlox has light pink flowers with a darker pink eye, grows about same size as 'Victoria', and is disease resistant as well.

The remaining perennial on the list of outstanding plants for Texas is Texas Gold Columbine (*Aquilegia chrysantha hinckleyana* 'Texas Gold'). This is a cool season perennial with attractive foliage and stunning, long-spurred yellow blossoms. It thrives in dappled shade, growing 2 feet tall and 2 feet wide. It blooms in early-mid spring.

A landscape with these perennials can provide blooms from spring to late fall. All have been through extensive testing to prove deserving of the designation as a Texas Superstar plant. Look for the Superstar label when shopping for these plants at your local nursery.

CONTAINER GARDENING

No place for a flower garden or vegetable garden in your yard? Consider making container gardens. Container gardens are an answer to the problem of lack of space and time to care for large flower or vegetable gardens. Pot gardens are easy to create, simple to maintain, and add charm and color wherever they are placed.



Most annual flowers do well in containers. You may want some of the mounded varieties and some that spill over the sides of the pot. Suggestions for annuals in a sunny location are small marigolds, zinnias, sweet potato vine, ageratum, kale, petunias, salvias, begonias, pansies, sedum, lantanas, geraniums, and sun coleus. Plants for shady areas include impatiens, wax and tuberous begonias, fuchsia, caladiums, coleus, ivies, purple sweet potato vine and asparagus fern.

Among the vegetables that do well in containers are peppers, lettuce, radishes, eggplant, cucumbers and tomatoes. Many herbs such as basil, dill, sage, mints, thymes, chives, marjoram, oregano, rosemary and lemon verbena also love to grow in pots. Herbs and vegetables thrive in the sunshine, so they should be grouped with sun-loving flowers.

Small, compact shrubs and ornamental grasses can be used as a middle-sized container planting. Many trees that normally grow in your area can be grown in a pot. The diameter of the pot should be 1/4 to 1/3 the height of the tree. The pot should be large enough to accommodate the plant for a number of years to prevent setbacks caused by constant repotting. Suitable trees for container growing are pine, beech, cedar, juniper, Japanese maple, spruce and fig.

Select containers on the basis of size, color and site in combination with the plant materials to be used. Any item that will hold soil can be made into a container. Terracotta pots are the most versatile, but require more water because they are porous and moisture evaporates more quickly than with plastic containers. Plastic, enamel, wood and fiberglass containers are readily available. Hanging baskets are

also container plantings.

All containers should have bottom drainage holes or a deep layer of coarse drainage material such as stones or shards. Packing "peanuts" are light weight and effective in providing drainage. Without adequate drainage, your carefully planted container will most certainly rot and die in a short time.

Soil used in container plantings should be loose and drain well. A commercial potting medium is highly recommended. Most have added nutrients and some time-release fertilizers, but the plantings will need regular doses of plant food.

The beauty of container gardening is the flexibility. They can be moved around and grouped for maximum effect to add color, height and texture where needed. A container planting can be formal, whimsical, casual, simple or as fancy as you want to make it. You can plant seeds for a container planting or buy nursery plants that are nearing maturity. The latter is "instant" ready and allows you to see the textures, shapes and colors that will work well together in a container.

A word of caution: In our Texas summer heat and sun, containers need daily attention. Some will need watered daily or even twice daily (especially hanging baskets). Many will appreciate and require afternoon shade to maintain their optimum appearance. Do not let them dry out completely. Keep moist, but not wet, and water in early morning or late afternoon, never mid-day.

With a bit of experience, you will soon be creating eye-catching container gardens to brighten your surroundings. There are many books available with ideas on container gardening. Browse your local book store or garden center for additional help and ideas.

MASTER GARDENER PLANT SALE

Saturday, May 14, 9am-3pm
4605 W. Waco Drive

Our plants have **multiplied**...
And we are **dividing**...
For you to **add** to your yard!

FIRE ANTS

Spring is upon us, and with the season come fire ants. This red imported fire ant (*Solenopsis invicta*) is a pest in the landscape and has a painful sting associated with its bite. Fire ants love to nest in lawns, parks, and many other places where we don't want them. They travel through mating flights, mass movement of colonies, float to new locations in flood water, and arrive in infested shipments of materials from other areas. Following spring rains, many freshly worked mounds pop up, and are especially unsightly.

There are two different methods of fire ant control, which the Extension Service refers to as "The Texas Two Step". This two-step method is a simple approach. The first step is to broadcast a bait insecticide over the entire yard. The second step is to treat individual mounds.

We need to ask "How" and "When" to apply the insecticides. If applied at the wrong time or used in the wrong way, it will not be effective or even work.

The baits (such as Amdro and Logic) are usually broadcast at 1-1/2 pounds per acre. The ants are attracted to the baits, take them back to their mounds and feed it to each other and then feed it to the Queen. It can take up to three days for the "taster" ants to get the bait to their Queen. Once or twice per year, usually in the spring and early fall, broadcast the bait. Use the proper spreader methods and apply only when the ants are actively searching for food. This is usually during the day in spring and in the cool of the evening in summer. This will keep you from wasting the bait when the ants are not foraging. Apply when the grass is dry, and above all, follow the directions on the label for usage. When label instructions are not followed, the treatment may not kill the fire ant colony or may cause the colony to split into more colonies.



The Individual Mound Treatment is the second step of treating fire ants. Products are applied as dusts, granules, or liquid drenches. Do not disturb the mound when applying individual mound treatments. Sneak up on them, and then use your

treatment. Again, follow directions on the insecticide for its usage.

Insecticide treatments do not prevent future fire ant infestations. They can rapidly re-invade the treated area from adjacent non-treated areas. Controlling the ants in cooperation with your neighbors reduces re-invasion pressure. New products are being introduced to the market each year. Research continues to search for methods of biological controls. In the meantime, the two-step method is the most effective for the homeowner to deal with these pests.

Visit the website: <http://fireant.tamu.edu> for additional information, including bulletins available through Extension.

PLANT SALE

The McLennan County Master Gardeners will hold their third annual plant sale on Saturday, May 14 from 9 a.m. until 3 p.m. Members will divide, transplant, and share plants from their yards and gardens. There will be many varieties of annuals and perennials, native plants, cacti, and house plants at reasonable prices. All plants will be from the local area, thus showcasing horticulture that will grow well locally. The sale will be on the lot next to 4605 West Waco Drive.

