



McLennan County Master Gardeners

Horticulture Newsletter

Spring, 2006

<http://mcmg.aspfreeserver.com>

Calendar of events:

May 20 – McLennan County Master Gardeners' Plant Sale
Call 757-5180 for information on upcoming extension events.

From McLennan County Master Gardeners:

Master Gardener Training - A new training session to become a certified McLennan County Master Gardener is scheduled to begin in June. Classes will be held from 1 until 5 p.m. on Wednesday afternoons. Participants will be required to attend 54 hours of classroom training followed by giving 54 hours of community volunteer service during the following year.

An orientation session will be held at 1 p.m. on April 26 at the Carleen Bright Arboretum on Estates Drive in Woodway to further explain the program. Interested persons may call the McLennan Co. Extension Office at 757-5180 to leave their name for additional information

McLennan County Master Gardeners Plant Sale - The fourth annual plant sale by the local Master Gardeners will be on May 20 from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Members will have plants which they have divided and transplanted from their yards. All plants will be from the local area, thus promoting plants which grow well and are adapted to this area. The sale will be held on the lot next to 4605 West Waco Drive.

Come and shop for annuals, perennials, native plants, cacti and house plants at reasonable prices. Some varieties go quickly.

Gardener's Gathering - A gardener's gathering will be held at the Carleen Bright Arboretum in Woodway on Sunday, March 19 from 1-4 pm. This is free and open to the public. The Master Gardeners' Superstar Garden will be featured along with a children's corner, garden plants and products for sale, free seeds, music, refreshments, and displays by participating clubs and businesses.

Drought Impact Visible With the Coming of Spring

The Central Texas area has been experiencing a drought for approximately nine months. The impact of this drought has been hidden, but with the coming of spring the damage will become more visible in our lawns and flower beds.

The lawn grasses will be one of the areas hardest hit, due to lawn dormancy. With the dormant brown lawns it is hard to see the damage from the extended drought. Since we don't see green lawns turning brown, we fail to properly water our lawns. Yet, water is still needed to keep dormant grasses alive. The homeowner will see drought damage as the lawn starts to green up this spring. Stressed grasses will be thinner and may have bare spots in the drier areas of the lawn.

To minimize damage make sure your lawn is getting the water it needs. A dormant lawn generally needs about one half inch of water per week. As warmer temperatures occur your lawn should start greening. Don't fertilize until the threat of freezing temperatures is past. You don't want to encourage an already stressed lawn out of dormancy too quickly and then have it hit with a freeze. This added stress will further damage your lawn. Mid April will be the best time to fertilize.

Shrubs can also be impacted by the drought. Most of us water our flower beds when we water our lawns. The lack of water this winter may result in some of the shrubs having limbs turn brown while the most severe areas will see the entire plant turn brown. Those plants with selective limb damage can be pruned. Cut out the damaged area to encourage new growth. Shrubs that are totally brown with leaves still attached to the limbs may have to be replaced. As with the lawn, minimize damage that may have already occurred by ensuring your flower beds are getting the water they need.

Firewise Landscaping

Months of drought and wind have combined to make much of Texas a tinderbox. Within seconds a small fire can spread and cause damage to a large area, including our homes. Hopefully, spring will bring much needed rains and lessen the danger. However, we are always going to have times of drought and there are steps we can take in our landscape to protect our homes and property from fire. The following are a few things to consider when planning and evaluating your home landscape to make it Firewise:

- Use fire resistant plants near the house. Space trees 10-15 feet apart at the crown; prune tree branches up 6 feet from ground. Keep branches from overhanging the house, especially the chimney area.
- Minimize the amount of plant material growing under trees. This can act as a ladder fuel to spread fire to tree crowns.
- Use low growing shrubs near the house, especially under windows.
- Highly volatile plants such as juniper, cedar and tall grasses should be planted away from the house.
- Incorporate non-combustible materials into your landscape such as ponds, dry creek beds, gravel pathways, driveways and patios. These create firebreaks to keep a fire from spreading.
- Maintenance is very important, even in winter. Keep grass and groundcovers mowed; prune and rake all dead matter from flowerbeds, shrubs and groundcovers. Rake and remove leaves.

For more information about Firewise Landscaping contact the McLennan County Cooperative Extension office and/or come to the Gardener's Gathering at the Carleen Bright Arboretum in Woodway on March 19 from 1-4 pm. There will be a Firewise display and Master Gardener Firewise Specialists will be available to answer your questions.

Raised Bed Garden

Raised beds are freestanding garden beds constructed several or more inches above the natural terrain. Area gardeners are finding that they help solve many problems. Poor soil quality, drainage, grade changes, soil compaction, excess sand or clay, undesirable soil ph readings are among the problems



that can be helped by building raised beds.

Raised bed gardens improve the environment for plants by lifting their roots above poor soil. The soil can be amended to provide a better growing medium for plants, and they are much easier to maintain.

Selection of site for raised beds goes hand in hand with the plant selection. Vegetables and ornamentals which require a lot of sun should be located in a raised bed where it will receive full sun, or at least morning sun rather than the hot afternoon sun. Shade-loving plants would need a bed out of full sunlight.

A raised bed should drain well so that plants do not become water logged. If the bed contains clay soil, it should be amended with organic matter to improve drainage. Good drainage is very important in vegetable beds.

Raised beds can be formal or informal, depending upon their shape and the edging chosen. The design should blend with its surroundings. The size of the bed should be kept in proportion to the space around it. The edging will establish the outline of the bed and hold the soil in place. Edgings may be landscape timbers, railroad ties, metal strips, bricks or stones - or it may just be soil mounded up from the edges without another edging material.

The raised bed does not have to be excessively deep to be effective. Eight to twelve inches is usually adequate. Vegetable beds benefit by being twelve to eighteen inches deep.

Irrigation of the raised bed should be considered prior to its construction. Watering can be done by hand or even an automated watering system can be installed at time of construction. An automatic system would need to be installed before soil is added to the bed.

If making a new bed where there is existing vegetation, this should be removed. A herbicide can kill perennial weeds or even covering the bed area with clear plastic for a couple of months will kill vegetation, a much slower process however. Once the site is bare of vegetation and roots, till the soil thoroughly. Once the edging is in place, soil can be added. Add decomposed organic matter (compost) to existing soil. If you need additional soil, it can be purchased in bulk or bags (though expensive if buying a number of bags). Grade the soil so that it slopes slightly away from the center of the bed to the edge, thus aiding drainage.

Once the soil is in place, happy planting in your new raised bed area !!

Spring In The Flower Beds

Pansies - apply light amounts of fertilizer to established pansy plantings and repeat monthly. Feed with a 3-1-2 or 4-1-2 ratio of nutrients, either granulated or liquid, following label directions. Dried blood meal is an excellent source of fertilizer for pansies.

Roses - should be pruned in February or March (except climbers which should be pruned immediately after they have bloomed). Remove weak canes and leave 6 to 8 healthy canes. Remove about half the plant height.

Stagger plantings of gladiolus and dahlia tubers in early spring at two-week intervals to prolong their flowering period. Do not plant caladium tubers until the soil temperature reaches 70 degrees (early May).

Before planting flowers and vegetables, prepare the beds. Clean out all debris and work in a couple of inches of organic matter such as compost, pine bark or sphagnum peat moss. This initial preparation will reward you with healthy growth and color from your plantings.

Most spring annuals can't be planted until the danger of killing frost has passed. The average date of the last frost in our area is March 15. Many warm season plants cannot tolerate cool soil temperatures.

Among the flower seeds that can be directly sown into the flower beds are larkspur, nasturtiums, annual phlox, coneflowers, petunias, cosmos. Other annuals that give early color in the landscape are begonias, coreopsis, portulacas, salvias, sweet alyssums, cockscombs, ageratums, marigolds, and zinnias. For instant color, purchase started annuals. Select short, compact plants, rather than lanky, marked-down bargain plants.

Divide fall-blooming perennials (such as chrysanthemums and asters) into individual plants and reset them into your previously worked beds. Also the late summer-blooming bulbs can be dug, divided, and replanted now. Share the excess with neighbors and friends for their flower beds.

Start your hanging baskets or plant new container gardens for the patio. Select plants for each container with the same growth requirements such as light and water.



Weeding - start early to keep ahead of the pesky weeds. Mulch will discourage weeds and make it easier to pull those that do come up. Weeds compete with your desirable plants for water and nutrients.

Starting a new flower bed? Have the soil tested before

planting to guide you in what your soil needs most. The local Extension Office has soil test bags and instructions for submitting for analysis.

EarthKind™ Benefits Humankind

The EarthKind program is a win-win situation for the home gardener who cares about the environment and wants a lovely landscape with less effort. To employ the principles of EarthKind, the gardener will base horticultural decisions on a deep, abiding respect for the environment, the latest scientifically sound information, and the EarthKind techniques of proper plant selection and culture. Pesticides will be used only as a last resort. If a pesticide becomes absolutely necessary, only the most environmentally-friendly product available will be selected.

Texas Cooperative Extension has come up with a plan, based on research-proven techniques, that combines the best of organic and traditional gardening and landscaping methods to create a new horticultural system for the 21st century. The premise behind this program is to select the right plants and plant them properly to avoid pest problems before they occur. If these EarthKind techniques are applied in landscaping, the following goals can be achieved:

- Reduce the volume of water used.
- Reduce the volume of fertilizers used.
- Reduce the volume of pesticides used.
- Reduce the volume of yard wastes entering landfills.

In order to put the EarthKind program into everyday practice, a gardener should consider the following:

1. Select plants that are attractive, pest resistant, and well adapted to the soils and climate of the area.
2. Practice good bed preparation prior to planting flowers and woody plants. In heavy clay soils, incorporate four inches of organic material plus three inches of expanded shale.
3. Have soil tested (contact the local Texas Cooperative Extension office), and base the fertilizer analysis on the recent soil test. Ensure that 50% of nitrogen is in the slow-release form.
4. Maintain a three to four inch thick layer of organic mulch.
5. In landscape beds, use drip or soaker hose irrigation if possible. Water thoroughly and less frequently.
6. Use pesticides only as a last resort.

Applying these EarthKind techniques on a regular basis will benefit the gardener's family, business, community, and the global environment. Remember "EarthKind to benefit humankind".

One of the most exciting aspects of the EarthKind program is the use of EarthKind roses. McLennan County Master Gardeners are involved in research trials of these roses, and a symposium will be held in spring 2007 in Waco to help area gardeners learn more about these showy, easy care landscape gems. Upcoming newsletters will have more information about EarthKind roses and the symposium.

Texas Mountain Laurel
Sophora Secundiflora

The Texas Mountain Laurel (*Sophora secundiflora*) is an attractive spring-flowering small tree with glossy, evergreen leaves and beautiful purple wisteria-like blooms smelling of grape Kool-aid. It is also known as Mescal Bean.



Texas Mountain Laurels are slow-growing trees, often multi-trunked, growing up to about 20 feet. Native to the alkaline soils of the Texas Hill Country, they are drought tolerant and a good specimen tree in this local area. Once established in a well-drained location, they require little additional care or irrigation and will grow in sun or part shade, blooming in early spring.

Young trees may be purchased at the nursery or grown from seed. The seed coats are very hard and must be nicked with a file to begin germination. If collected early in the summer before the coat hardens, seeds may be collected and planted immediately for quick sprouting. Children should be warned that the red seeds contain a poison.

The Texas Mountain Laurel is an excellent source of evergreen foliage and beautiful spring flowers, thriving in the dryer areas of Texas.

Mark Your Calendar

McLennan County Master Gardeners'

Plant Sale

May 20, 9am -3pm

4605 W. Waco drive