Texas Master Gardeners

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Bulbs—The Layaway Plan

According to Doug Welch, bulbs are considered the layaway plan for spring flowers. You can buy them now but it's best to wait until the soil cools off significantly before planting. In our area that can be November thru January. Flowering bulbs will provide early color in your garden before your other perennials begin their spring blooming. It's also a good time to divide bulbs.

There are several types of bulbs that grow here and can be planted once temperatures cool off and stay that way. Try **Day Lilies, Gladiola, Amaryllis, Calla Lilies, Daffodils, Narcissus, Dutch Iris, Snowflakes.** These bulbs tend to naturalize which means they come back year after year. If they naturalize well then they should increase in size each year which may require thinning at some point. After blooming it is best to hold off removing the mature foliage until it begins to turn yellow.

Two bulbs, **Hyacinth** and **Tulips**, need a little special care before planting….they require at least 6 - 8 weeks of refrigeration or chill time. However, **now** is the time to purchase them before supplies run out with nurseries or catalog stores. If pre-chilled now, then they will be ready to plant in early January with blooming in March. Beware, if you store these bulbs in your refrigerator do not leave them near apples which emits a gas that will cause the bulbs to be deformed. Also, tulips are annuals in this area so once they have bloomed you will want to discard them and start over again next year.

Planting Requirements:

- Plant in well-drained soil in a **sunny** location.
- Best planted in groupings of at least 3 to 5.
- Plant with the pointy-end up in a mix of compost and fertilizer at the base of the bulb.
- Research planting depth for each bulb type.
- Cover and mulch 3-4".
- Water well after planting but not to the point of being soggy as they will rot.

Inside this issue:

Butterflies for the Summer….by Jena Jackson

Butterflies have fascinated me since childhood. I loved the beauty of watching them glide through the summer afternoon or finding a carefully placed chrysalis under a leaf. Searching for ways to attract as many butterflies as possible, contributes to my intense love of flowers and my numerous trips to the plant nursery.

This summer of 2021 has somehow produced an abundance of butterflies both in species and population. I'm not sure if the abundance of rain in July or the extreme freezing temperatures in February are to blame, but it has made for an outstanding butterfly season at the Jackson house. No complaints from me!

The unusual freezing temperatures in February killed many of the foundation plants around my house. I lost my large bottle brushes - the miniature ones survived. The Indian Hawthorns died back to the ground but have sprouted back. As spring finally arrived, I realized that although many plants didn't survive, there were many others that not only survived but multiplied. The milkweed, both native and tropical, that I have babied for three years returned with a vengeance. The red salvia that reseeds every year had decided to take over every open space in every flower bed. Many of my other plants did very well also, the roses were fantastic, but the butterflies don't really seem to favor the roses. They were gorgeous though and greatly enjoyed.

The extraordinarily wet July allowed these plants to grow quickly and stay healthy much longer into the summer and the butterflies definitely appreciated the change. Usually, I will have three or four monarch butterflies each year. Not very impressive, but always appreciated. **Swallowtails** are more numerous than Monarchs and there are normally **Pipevine** and **Black** varieties. Later in the summer (which in my opinion lasts well into October) the ever-present **Sulphur** butterflies emerge and round out the season. This pattern drastically changed in 2021.

The first **Monarch** of this year arrived in August. Luckily for her the milkweed was ready and waiting. Eggs were laid and before long caterpillars were eating every milkweed leaf, bud, and bloom. For the next two months monarchs were everywhere. On one day in September, I counted over 40 caterpillars in one flower bed. Then, came chrysalis time. To say they were everywhere would be an understatement. They were in the sink, on the bicycle spokes, on the ceiling, under the chair cushions, on the wind chimes, in the fireplace, and of course on other plants. These were just the ones I could find. One corner of our porch became known as the nursery, there were always about 10 hanging there at a time. Magic time was actually when there were 10 or more butterflies flying around the yard at one time.

Monarchs weren't the only visitors. The swallowtails were breaking records too. The Pipevine and Black swallowtails have host plants that grow naturally on our property. These plants must have experienced the same growth boost from the weather changes. The swallowtails were not only more plentiful, but they recruited new family members. **Giant Swallowtails**, **Eastern Tiger**, and **Palamedes Swallowtails** were spotted several times over the summer. Swallowtails caterpillars are not cute or easy to find. They are well camouflaged.

Other butterfly friends came and went during this unusual summer. Spotted on several occasions were **Cabbage White**, **Variegated Fritillary, Queen, American Lady, Painted Lady**, and the always present **Cloudless Sulphur**.

What did I learn from this amazing butterfly summer? The most important lesson is that there can never be enough host plants. They need to be spread throughout the area not just in one flowerbed. Also be prepared; the eggs are not only laid on these plants, but the caterpillars eat these plants. Caterpillars eat a lot, some species molt (shed skin to grow) over 10 times. The host plants may be stripped. Other flowers need to be abundant so the butterflies have a source of food. My food sources consisted of **zinnias, coneflowers, salvias, lantanas**, **vitex,** and **cupheas**. The wider the variety the better. Beware of the application of pesticides, they can kill caterpillars you may not mean to kill, along with whatever pest you are targeting. Finally sit back and enjoy the show.

Preparing for Winter Birds

Have you noticed that your backyard birds are not coming to your feeders right now? This is a normal pattern in the fall because food sources are abundant and birds don't need to supplement their food from a bird feeder. But, winter is coming and once freezing weather hits, many of those food sources will diminish forcing the birds to return to your feeders. Before this happens, now is a good time to take the feeders down, clean and disinfect them and get ready for winter.

Birdseed Feeders: Take the feeder down; throw the unused seed into the trash can (don't leave it on the ground for critters to consume); clean with soapy water removing any dirt and debris; then disinfect with 50-50 solution of white vinegar and water. Soon, **Pine Siskins** and other small finches will be migrating to our area. They are especially susceptible to salmonella from other birds and badly infected birdseed so you want to start out the winter bird season with clean feeders.

Suet Feeder Holders: Suet feeder holders (see picture above) should also be cleaned and disinfected using the same method above before loading new suet for the upcoming winter. These will attract **Nuthatches, Chicadees, and Wood Peckers.**

Also, at this time of year, it's a good idea to stock up on Nyjer or thistle as the **Gold Finches** will soon be arriving.

Remember, besides suet and thistle, **black oil sunflower seeds** are the best seed for most wild birds.

Trees—Fall Color in Texas

If you are envious of the fall colors up north, then here are a few trees that will grow in Texas and still provide that vibrant fall color:

Japanese Maples (Acer palmatum): Though this tree is not originally from Texas, it has adapted quite well to most Texas gardens. It's a small, deciduous tree that grows from 6 – 20 feet and spreads from 10 – 20 feet. It prefers to grow in moist conditions and should not dry out. It prefers filtered light, especially morning sun with afternoon shade. Fall colors can range from yellows and gold to deep reds and maroons.

Ginkgo (Ginkgo biloba): Another non-native that is one of the oldest species of trees found on earth. It grows from 50 – 80 feet tall and spreads 30 – 40 feet wide. It prefers full sun to partial shade in sandy, well-drained soil. It is considered a medicinal tree with various healing properties. The leaves are an unusual fan shape that provide bright yellow colors in the fall.

Shantung Maple (Acer truncatum): This tree is on the list of Texas Superstars because it can withstand the hot Texas sun, drought, and high winds. It is a mid-sized tree growing to 25 feet and spreading 20 feet. It also has a non-aggressive root system and works exceptionally well in urban settings. The fall colors tend towards a brilliant red depending on soil pH.

Chinese Pistache (Pistacia chinensis): Another Texas Superstar that is highly regarded by horticulturists for being not only beautiful but pest-free and easy to maintain. At maturity, it is 40 – 50 feet tall with a 30-foot wide canopy. With good management, it can grow up 2 – 3 feet a year with high tolerance to drought, heat, and wind. Fall colors range from orange, red-orange, and crimson.

Shumard Red Oak (Quercus shumardii): A large, deciduous oak tree that can reach heights of 120 feet. It is a fast, growing tree that does well in moist, well-drained soils. It prefers full sun with high heat tolerance. Fall colors are yellowish-brown to deep maroon.

Growing Camellias in Texas

Camellias are a beautiful evergreen plant reminiscent of old southern gardens but with some special care can also grow in our part of Texas. Camelias have dark, glossy leaves and can grow between 10 and 25 feet tall. Both varieties have blossoms in white, yellow, red, rose, pink, and even red/white combo.

There are two species of camellias available in the U.S.: **Japanese** and **Sasanqua**. While the Japanese (*Camellia japonica*) and Sasanqua (*Camellia sasanqua*) camellias look very similar, the main difference between the two species is their bloom time. Japanese camellias usually bloom between fall and spring, whereas the sasanquas begin blooming anytime between summer through winter, but usually between September and December. Though sasanquas tolerate more sun than the Japanese camellias, they are less cold hardy, preferring USDA zones 7 through 9. What the two have in common is a planting location away from high wind in a dappled location, preferably with morning sun and afternoon shade. Once successfully established, camellias are very easy to maintain.

The history of camellias goes back to its cultivation in China and Japan originally as a tea producing plant. (Camellias sinesnsis). The leaves, not the flowers, were highly prized for making tea. Early settlers originally tried to grow this plant species in the south as a start to the tea-growing business, but the plant variety did not thrive in southern climates

How to Successfully Grow: Camellias need a moist, well-draining acidic soil with a pH from 5.0 – 5.5 but can tolerate up to 7.0. Soil testing is a **must** to help the gardener adjust or amend their soil to ensure optimum growth. If your site soil is too alkaline, then you can lower the pH by using elemental sulfur such as ferrous sulfate or aluminum sulfate. Some gardeners swear that decomposed pine needles will do the trick, but since it takes a long time for needles to decompose, it might be better to amend with elemental sulfur. If your site soil is too acidic, then you can raise the pH by incorporating crushed agricultural limestone or dolomite.

Now is a good time to plant camellias and the nurseries are full of them this time of year.

How to Plant:

- Select a site that will get partial shade, won't compete with other trees, and away from high north wind.
- Dig an area 18 - 24 inches deep – spaced 5 feet apart.
- Thoroughly mix 2 parts pine bark mulch, 1 part clean sand, and 1 part aged cow manure or compost to fill the hole. Fill the hole to at least 3" above the soil surface.
- Rinse the roots with water and set the root ball in the planting hole mounding the tops of the roots are about 1 – 2 inches above soil level.
- Spread 3 inches of organic mulch around the base but keep at least 6 inches away from the plant base. Many people like to use pine needs instead of bark mulch.
- Water camellias deeply to a depth of 15 inches every 7 – 14 days.
- Fertilize with an acid-loving plant fertilizer **AFTER** the blooms fade.
- Prune as needed after blooming to remove dead or damaged branches. Thin out center branches if the shrub is crowded and light is not getting through.
- Watch for petal blight where the flowers will turn brown. Remove immediately.
- Check for leaf scale or insect pests if the leaves start to turn brown or yellow. Treat ac-

What is Mushroom Compost?

Many experienced gardeners have touted mushroom compost as an excellent soil amendment for the garden. But what is it, and how does it work? Mushroom compost is not made up of mushrooms instead it is the soil/substrate that mushroom farmers utilize to grow their mushroom crop. Once spent they will sell the soil to gardeners as a soil amendment. This soil is high in organic matter, essential nutrients, and micro-organisms, which helps increase soil structure, water capacity, and microbial activity. The mixture that mushroom farmers use varies, but typically it's a blend of chopped straw, poultry or horse manure, gypsum, nitrogen-containing compounds, and water. Due to high temperatures during the composting process, most mushroom compost is free of pests and weed seeds.

Be aware that many mushroom composts have a large quantity of salt or other unstable material, which means it should rest at least two years before applying unless the mushroom farmer has already aged it before selling. Many gardeners purchase mushroom compost now to dress their spring vegetable beds and let them sit for the next few months so that the "hot" mixture doesn't overpower new plants. Another way to avoid a case of too "hot" compost is to make compost tea by mixing one part compost with four parts water. This fertilizer will still have an abundance of beneficial micro-organisms similar to the compost but won't burn seedlings or newly planted vegetables.

Field Trip to Aquaponics Farm

On October 23rd, the GCMG Intern Class went on a field trip to Texas US Farms in Iola, Texas. This is an aquaponics farm using water, nutrients, and tilapia to grow no soil vegetables.

Trunk or Treat
October 30th

Grimes County Master Gardeners celebrated Trunk or Treat in Anderson, Texas on Saturday, October 30th. The turnout was huge, the kids were cute and we got a lot of pumpkins decorated.

Events

Grimes County Master Gardeners will have their **Monthly Business Meeting on Tuesday, November 9th, at the Navasota Center, starting at 9:00 a.m.**

Monthly Garden Work Day: November 16th—9:00 a.m. at the Grimes County Extension Office.

Due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, many in-person continuing education classes are not available. Below are some virtual learning and webinars for this month.

November 2021

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16 	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25 	26	27
28	29	30				

GOT A GARDENING QUESTION?

Got a gardening problem or question?

Contact our Master Gardeners to get help: grimescountymastergardeners@gmail.com or call us at 936-873-3917.

A photo along with your question will help us with the answer.

Continuing Education and Events

- Nov 4, 11: **Grimes County Master Gardeners Intern Training,** 9:00 a.m.—1:00 p.m.
- Nov 10: Gardening on the Gulf Coast, "**Christmas, Easter or Thanksgiving—Which Cactus is That?**" 10:00 a.m.—11:00 a.m.
- Nov 11: Urban Harvest, "**Edible Landscape**", 10:00 a.m.—11:00 a.m.
- Nov 13: Grimes County Master Gardeners, "**Navasota Farmers Market**", 9:00 a.m.—1:00 p.m. , Navasota Library Parking Lot
- Nov 19: Home Grown Series, Harris County AgriLife, "**Rainwater Harvesting**", 10:00 a.m.—11:00 a.m.

Texas Master Gardeners

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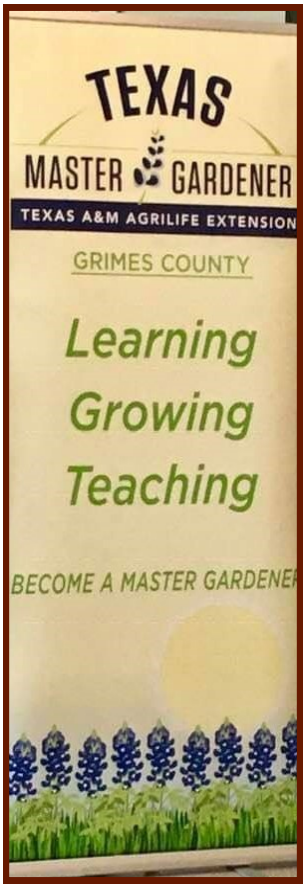
Website: txmg.org/grimes
Facebook: www.facebook.com/GrimesCountyMasterGardeners

Grimes County Master Gardeners

Please send submissions and photos by the 20th of each month to: pwparmley@gmail.com



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