

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office



PHOTOS BY **William M. Johnson**



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Paperwhites have been producing bountiful displays of scented flowers since mid-January. Paperwhites grow from bulbs and can often be seen growing in abandoned lots.

The first day of spring will soon be here (Mar 19 at 11:30 p.m.) according to the astronomical definition. From a gardening perspective, the exact timing of "spring" is less precise. This has been an exceptionally mild winter. That's not necessarily a hard science meteorological assessment just my

horticultural opinion. This is the first winter where the firebush (*Hamelia patens*) in my back yard has not suffered any dieback from cold temperatures. Firebush will die back to the ground by the end of a typical winter season and new leaves emerge from the base of the plant when spring ar-

rives. Not so this year as the bush is already putting out new growth on 14-foot tall branches. We should remember that the arrival of the spring season along the Texas Gulf Coast tends to have a bumpy landing. Mother Nature has been known to deliver a surprise cold snap during this time of year.



Review the following gardening checklist for things to do as the spring season arrives.

ANNUALS: Copper plants, ageratum and ornamental amaranth and other annuals can be set out.

FERTILIZE LANDSCAPE TREES AND SHRUBS: March is an excellent time to fertilize established landscape trees and shrubs as they come out of their winter dormancy period and put out new growth. It is not necessary to punch holes in the ground to fertilize trees or shrubs or to use fertilizer spikes. Surface application of a granular fertilizer is quite satisfactory and an even better practice.

VEGETABLES: Many types of vegetables can usually be established in the garden during mid-March including transplants of tomatoes and peppers as well as direct-seeding of corn, cucumbers, southern peas and many other vegetables.

Be prepared to provide cold weather protection as may be needed. It is still too early to plant okra as okra does not tolerate cool spells. Wait until mid-April before planting okra seeds.

DIVIDING PERENNIALS: Divide existing clumps of fall-blooming perennials, such as chrysanthemums, autumn asters, Mexican marigold mint, and physostegia (obedient plant). Separate the clumps into individual plants and set them at least 8-10" apart in groupings of five or more.

AVOID OVER-PLANTING: Be selective in planting annuals and bedding plants. Set out no more than you can properly care for. For limited garden areas, try using containers on the patio or porch.

HANGING BASKETS: Late March is an ideal time to set out hanging baskets. The variety of plants that can be used is limited only by your imagination. Suitable plants for hanging baskets include portulaca, ivy, geraniums, airplane plant, bougainvillea, English ivy, begonias, and a host of others.

REPOT HOUSEPLANTS: It's an excellent time to repot houseplants. Gently knock the plant out of the pot and inspect the root system. If the roots are crowded and matted on the exterior portion of the root ball, put the plant in a larger pot.

CAMELLIAS AND AZALEAS: As camellia and azalea plants finish blooming, fertilize them with an azalea-camellia fertilizer according to the manufacturer's recommendations.

WEED KILLERS AND TREES: Many landscape trees and shrubs are damaged or killed each year by the careless application of weed killers to lawns, including those found in mixes of weed killers and fertilizers (commonly called "weed & feed"). Always read and follow all label directions very carefully including application near the drip line of landscape trees and

shrubs.

PLANT OF THE MONTH: I received several inquiries about plants seen in landscapes producing bountiful displays of white flowers that look like small daffodils. They are known as paperwhites and are closely related to daffodils.

However, daffodils require a lot of effort to produce flowers in our area. Daffodil bulbs need to be chilled in the refrigerator for several weeks before planting. In contrast, paperwhites do not require chill hours. They started blooming across the county in January, and many plants still have an abundance of blooms. They are among the first plants to bloom in any landscape and the last plant to die out when property has been abandoned. Paperwhites have been setting blooms since mid-January and patches of paperwhites can still be seen by alert motorists with a sharp eye. In fact, paperwhites are commonly seen in vacant lots.