

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office



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PHOTOS BY **William M. Johnson**

Natal plum is a low maintenance landscape shrub that's now blooming along Galveston's Seawall Boulevard (shown in the background). Natal plum is tolerant of salt spray and is therefore an excellent plant for the seaside garden, even in exposed conditions.

Over the past few days, I received several calls regarding the identification of a shrub-like plant that is growing along the Seawall on Galveston Island. The impetus for so many calls was not surprising. When a shrub produces an abundance of eye-catching flowers, it's likely to catch the eye of inquisitive gardeners. When the shrub can produce an attractive floral display along the Gulf shore, it is

even more amazing as the salt spray from Gulf can be a hostile growing environment for most "ordinary" landscape plants. The shrub in question is commonly known as natal plum (*Carissa macrocarpa*). Despite its common name, natal plum is not closely related to plums that we purchase in the grocery store or grow in home orchards. Natal plum is native to

the coastal region of Natal, South Africa. While natal plum may produce flowers and fruits throughout the year, the peak period for flowering and fruiting is May through September. Flowering is a bit earlier than normal this year and is likely due to the unusually mild winter weather. The edible fruit is an attractive, plum-shaped red berry about 2 inches long

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which tastes like sweet cranberries.

Natal plum is an outstanding plant for areas near the shoreline. It's little wonder that Natal plum is often a major component of commercial landscapes along the Seawall including hotel and restaurant landscapes.

Leaves are densely spaced, attractive dark-green and glossy. It's a low maintenance shrub once it becomes well-established in the landscape.

Natal plum has a drawback—its branches are armed with stout and double-tipped thorns that grow 1-to-2 inches long.

Gardeners' Q&As

Question: I have a beautiful crop of onions. Should I break over the tops of the onion plants to get a larger bulb?

Answer: This question comes up quite often among gardeners who are interested in growing large onions. Breaking over the tops of onion plants will not increase bulb size and may, in fact, prevent bulb enlargement after the tops are broken over. Onion bulbs increase in size as sugars manufactured in the top are translocated to the bulb. If the tops are broken over, this process stops, thereby preventing further bulb enlargement.

Question: Is it necessary to remove the garden soil from around my onion bulbs in the spring in order to make large bulbs?

Answer: It would not be neces-

sary to do so. Bulbing of onions is controlled by variety, temperature and length of day. When all the required conditions for bulbing are met, the onion will bulb.

Removing the soil from around the base of the plant will not increase bulbing, although it appears to because the bulbs are more visible. This procedure may do more damage than good, especially if white varieties of onions are grown. Removing the soil from around white onions can result in "sunburning" which causes the top of the bulbs to become green.

Question: Our pampas grass has really gotten out of hand. It stands almost 10 feet tall and is blocking our view of the road. It has never been pruned in all the years it has been there.

What can we do with this plant?

Answer: I really like the texture and form that pampas grass can provide to a landscape especially when it produces its seed heads later in the summer. However, I always provide a cautionary note to homeowners about planting this grass. Pampas grass can easily become a problem due to its size. Older plants are almost impossible to dig up by hand. It often takes a tractor or backhoe to get them up.

However, you can manage the growth by cutting the tops back during late winter before new

growth is initiated. Cut the top growth back close to the ground in mid-January before new leaves start to emerge. Try to prune back to at least 1 foot from the ground.

This will require heavy duty electric clippers or even use of a chainsaw—pampas grass is one tough plant. Wear gloves to avoid cutting yourself from the sharp edged leaves. Make this an annual project starting next January and your pampas grass will stay manageable.

