

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office



PHOTO CREDIT: Dr. 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 shrub for the seaside garden.

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 gar-

deners. When the shrub can produce an attractive floral display along the Gulf shore, it is even more amazing as the salt spray from the Gulf can be a hostile growing environment for many types of landscape plants.

The shrub in question is commonly known as na-

tal 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



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fruits throughout the year, the peak period for flowering and fruiting is May through September. Flowering was a bit delayed this spring and is likely due to the unusually cold temperatures of winter. The edible fruit is an attractive, plum-shaped red berry about 2 inches long 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: How can you tell the difference between a slicing type cucumber and a pickling type cucumber?

Answer: All pickles are cucumbers, but not all cucumbers make good pickles. Slicing type cucumbers are generally dark green in color and are from six-to-eight inches in length when mature. Pickling cucumbers tend to be lighter in color and are short and blocky in shape. An important point to remember is

that if you intend to put up pickles, then you definitely should grow a pickling type variety. Pickling cucumbers were developed to go through the brining process and will generally produce a higher quality pickling product.

If you intend to use cucumbers mainly in salads, it is generally recommended that you use a slicing type cucumber. However, pickling varieties can also be used in salads—I rather like their crispness and flavor.

Question: I have an excellent crop of tomatoes this year but many tomatoes suddenly developed cracks as they ripened. Is there anything I can do to prevent this?

Answer: Cracking is a physiological disorder caused by soil moisture fluctuations; it is not caused by insects or diseases. When tomatoes are still green but near maturity and soil moisture levels become dry, tomatoes will likely start showing signs of cracking. At this stage of maturity, the "skin" of the tomato becomes thicker and more rigid which serves to protect the tomato during and after harvest. Cracks on the fruit may either be radial (circular) or longitudinal (lengthwise) or a single fruit may develop a combination of both types.

When the soil moisture level is low at the start of the ripening period of a tomato and then ex-

cessive (or even adequate) soil moisture is restored after the ripening process begins, the plant will resume translocation of nutrients and moisture into the fruit. This will cause the fruit to enlarge, which in turn splits the outer skin of the fruit and results in cracking.

The single best control for cracking is to ensure that an even soil moisture level is maintained. It is helpful to apply a layer of organic mulch around the base of the plant. This serves as a buffer and helps reduce soil moisture fluctuations. Weather conditions have been on the dry side over the past several weeks and fruit cracking is more likely to be a problem if tomato plants are not watered regularly to maintain an even soil moisture level.

Question: How can you tell when jalapeno peppers are mature?

Answer: Jalapeno peppers are edible and flavorful at all stages of their growth. However, a connoisseur of jalapeno peppers can distinguish a definite flavor difference between a fully mature jalapeno and one harvested early. Jalapeno peppers develop small cracks in the skin on the shoulders when they are ready to pick. Jalapenos are ready to be picked when they are firm and bright green, but you can leave them on the plant until they turn red.

