**Recycling Christmas Trees, December 31- January 6**

Have you ever considered putting to good use your Christmas tree instead of throwing it out to the curb for the trash man or burning it in the burn pile? There are a variety of other options that are environmentally sound and allow you to get a secondary use out of your tree. Some of the more common options are recycling, mulching, and composting. Other more unique options include erosion control, fish habitat, and backyard bird feeder.

Many local municipalities and organizations offer Christmas tree recycling. This is an option for individuals who don’t want take the time to recycle the tree themselves. If you are an avid gardener you may want to consider mulching or composting your tree. Christmas trees will make a great addition to any compost pile and can be cut up into smaller sections to fit in your compost pile. If you have access to a wood chipper, you can run the tree through the chipper and this will result in great mulch that you can add around you landscaping beds.

If gardening is not your hobby, but you still want to utilize your tree on your property consider some of the more unique options. If you have a ditch, river bank, or slope on your property that has erosion issues place your tree in the area experiencing erosion issues. The tree will slow down the speed of water runoff and hold back soils, thus reducing erosion. If you have a pond on your property your tree can create excellent fish habitat. Place the tree in shallow water where it is covered by 1 to 2 feet of water. The tree will provide habitat for small invertebrates and fish. The organisms that will be attracted to the tree will be eaten by bigger fish and those fish will be eventually eaten by game fish such as bass and catfish. The tree will also provide a food source for some pond dwelling critters as it decays and breaks down. The most unique option is turning your tree into a backyard bird feeder. This can be accomplished by digging a hole and your backyard and basically replanting the tree. You can place on the tree feeders and other common food materials that are used to attract birds such as orange slices. The tree will provide branches for the birds to land on and make more of a sanctuary then just hanging a bird feeder on a pole. Obviously, the tree will eventually decay to the point and which it will need to be taken down and cut into smaller sections and which it can be added to compost pile or used for mulch.

Instead of throwing your Christmas tree this year in the garbage truck or burn pile consider one of the above options that will give a second life to your Christmas tree.

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**Shifting Waterfowl Populations, January 7-13**

Waterfowl are one of the most popular game of choice for hunters not only here in East Texas, but also across North America. East Texas has a rich heritage of duck hunting due to abundant duck habitat in the form of flooded bottomland timber, reservoirs, and countless waterways. Because of this the sound of shotguns is a common sound across the swamps during the winter months. However, the swamps seem to becoming more and more quite every year. This is due to a trend that is occurring across waterfowl populations throughout North America where birds are short stopping causing a shift in wintering grounds. As a geese and crane hunter on the Texas coastal plain I have personally witnessed this shift and which fields that routinely held tens of thousands of wintering geese 15 years ago or now eerily empty. Witnessing the emptiness of wintering grounds inspired me to pursue the topic of short stopping for my Masters Degree.

Don’t get me wrong fantastic waterfowl hunting can still be found across East Texas and other traditional wintering grounds across Texas and the Continent. However, long time waterfowl hunters can attest that wintering waterfowl populations are just not what they used to be. Across the board most waterfowl species are at all-time record high so we should be seeing some of the best waterfowl seasons. However, wintering grounds are shifting northward because birds are short stopping which means they are not migrating as far south. Short stopping is not an even occurrence across species. For example, over 90% of Redhead population still winters in their historical wintering grounds along the Texas coastal bend. In contrast, the midcontinent population of Lesser Snow Geese 30 years ago where not found outside of the rice field regions of Texas and Louisiana. Wintering grounds have now shifted to Arkansas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Missouri, and with some individuals spending the winter as far North as Nebraska. Most duck species have also experienced some degree of a northward shift. Wood ducks, a yearlong resident of East Texas are not experiencing a northward shift.

The reasons for short stopping vary amongst waterfowl species, but there appears to be four common reasons. These reasons are habitat changes, agriculture practices, hunting pressure and warmer winters. Habitat changes consist of habitat loss or degradation in historical wintering grounds. Across the south many swamps have been drained due to development, flood control, and reduced river inflows. Habitat changes have also occurred across many of the prairie states that have benefited waterfowl. For example, almost every pasture in the central part of Texas up through Oklahoma has a stock pond. These man made ponds have created abundant water for waterfowl in areas that historically lacked abundant water. Agriculture practices have changed which include rice production regions, tillage techniques, and harvest equipment efficiency. These changes have altered the ability of certain regions to support waterfowl populations. Hunting pressure is extremely high in historical wintering grounds and birds have adapted by learning they can survive winter in more northern regions where hunting pressure can be light or absent. Lastly, the underlying reason that may be at the heart of driving waterfowl northward is warmer winters. As winters continue to steadily get warmer, waterfowl are able to winter further north and survive and arrive in summer breeding grounds and a more healthy condition then if they would have migrated further south.

It is no doubt that waterfowl or short stopping and wintering further north than historically. The reasons vary and are still being investigated by biologists. But, short stopping appears to be the new normal in waterfowl populations and is a fact of life hunters will have to accept.

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**Why do I need a soil test for my lawn or garden? January 14-20**

If you a homeowner or backyard gardener you may be wondering if you should perform a soil test before you apply fertilizer this spring. You must certainly should! The most important reason to perform a soil test is the results will tell you what is required for your plants to perform at their fullest potential. This will help your turf grass to be thick and dark green, ornamentals to have gorgeous flowers, or your vegetables to produce a bumper crop. Other important reasons are a soil test will ensure you are not wasting your money applying fertilizer that will not be utilized and also that over applied fertilizer will not runoff your property and enter a watershed. Nutrient runoff is more prevalent in yards then in agriculture operations and this is a direct result of homeowners blindly applying fertilizer. Agriculture operations almost always perform soil test because every penny an operator can save per acre adds up when applying fertilizer to thousands of acres. However, most homeowners don’t perform soil test due to the smaller scale and potential price savings so they routinely over apply fertilizer and/or apply nutrients not needed.

Soil test should be performed at least couple of months prior to the date plants are actively growing or planted. This allows time for your soil test to be collected, analyzed, and results delivered. It also allows time for fertilize to be applied and to combine with soil and change the nutrient content. In most areas of East Texas soils have a low PH and the PH will need to be raised for plants to grow and flourish. This is accomplished through a process called liming. This can be accomplished through a variety of products and materials including agriculture lime, calcium, and wood ash. If you soil is acidic and requires an application of lime this should be ideally done in the fall or early winter. Soil PH will not instantly change and sometimes it may take 6 months to a year for your liming application to increase the PH.

A properly collected soil sample should contain soil from several different spots in your lawn or garden. This will ensure that your soil results are an average and not skewed. You should also collect from spots that represent the area and not spots that may not accurately represent your soil. This can include next to a drainage ditch, compost pile, and burn pile. Use a shovel and dig approximately six to eight inches and take soil from the middle of the spade. Avoid including plant material as this can give false results. One you have collected soil from several spots you should mix it and then send it to a laboratory for analysis. Two local universities, Texas A&M and Stephen F. Austin offer soil testing for a fairly decent price. Results will show your soil PH, nutrients in PPM, and what nutrients are lacking. They will also give you fertilizer recommendations for the plant you are growing.

If you need help performing a soil test, collecting, or understanding the results please contact the extension office. The extension office also has soil testing collection kits that are free for you to pick up.

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**Managing Poultry in Winter, January 21-27**

Winter can be a tough time on your chickens and can result and decreased production and negative health impacts. You can divide managing your chickens during winter into three categories. The first category is basic steps to take to ensure your chickens are comfortable and healthy. The second category is how to maintain egg production during winter. And lastly, the third category is how to keep chicks alive during the winter.

Generally speaking, it does not get cold enough here in East Texas for your chickens to freeze to death. However, you should at the very least ensure your chickens have access to a barn or shed that remains above freezing, dry, and out of the wind. Ideally chickens should be kept at around 60 to 75 degrees F.; however backyard chickens will be just fine in colder temperatures as long as they can remain dry. If roosters are exposed to very cold temperatures, their combs can turn black, misshapen, and rot. This is equivalent to frost bite in humans’ fingers and toes when exposed to cold temperatures. A heat lamp can be used in your chicken coop to raise temperatures and keep it more comfortable for your chickens. Lastly, be sure if we do experience prolonged freezing temperatures that chickens have access to ice free water. Even though chickens can survive in cold temperatures they become more susceptible to other diseases that can result in sickness, mortality, and reduced production. It should also be of note that if keeping your chickens and a closed coop ammonia buildup can become a problem. Because we are trying to retain heat we typically don’t consider ventilation during the winter. However, ventilation is very important in winter and adequate airflow must be maintained to keep ammonia levels down.

To address the second category of maintaining egg production during winter it is all about focusing on daylight manipulation. Chickens lay eggs based off of number of hours of daylight. During the fall as daylight decreases egg production will also decrease until it is minimal to none. To retain maximum egg production hens require at a minimal 14 hours of sunlight a day. This can be provided during the winter through an artificial light source. During the shortest day lengths of winter you will need to supply at least 4-6 hours of artificial light source. Once day lengths start to increase in the spring you can begin to cut back the amount of time you leave on your artificial light source.

The third category to talk about is chick management during winter. Obviously, cold temperatures are the greatest threat to chicks during the winter. Minimizing the space available in your coop will decrease the amount of area that is needed to be heated. Also, you should begin to heat your coop at least two days prior to chick arrival to allow time for the coop to heat up. The rule of thumb is to start chicks around 95 degrees F. at one day of age. From there you should decrease the temperature about 5 degrees per week until a month of age.

By following the procedures above you will be able to keep your chickens healthy and warm this winter and also continue to produce eggs.

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**Spring Potatoes, January 28- February 3**

Potatoes are one of America’s most popular vegetable and the average American consumes 125 pounds a year. Now is the time of the year to start planning for planting potatoes in your spring garden. Potatoes can be a fairly easy crop to grow and can result in a bountiful harvest. However, potatoes are a cool season crop and if wanting to grow them in your spring garden you need to plant as soon as the threat for frost has passes. Potatoes grow best when the days are warm and the nights are cool.

Two types of potatoes commonly planted here in East Texas are red and white. The red type is the most popular and store longer then the white type, however the white type has better cooking qualities. Recommended red type varieties are Dark Red Norland, Norland, Red LaSoda, and Viking. Recommended white varieties are Atlantic, Gemchip, Kennebec, and Superior.

Potatoes need full sun and do best in loose, well drained, slightly acid soil. All debris should be removed form the soil before making beds. Soil should be worked into beds that are 10 to 12 inches high and 36 inches apart. Because potatoes need adequate fertilizer early in the season, apply most of the fertilizer just before planting. Use 2 to 3 pounds of complete fertilizer such as 10- 20-10 for each 30 feet of row in bands 2 inches to each side and 1 inch below the seed piece. Do not allow the fertilizer to touch the seed piece. Apply fertilizer by flatting the beds at 6 to 8 inches high and 10 to 12 inches wide. Using the corner of a hoe or stick, open a trench about 4 inches deep on each side of the bed. Apply half of the fertilize in each trench. The seed pieces will be planted in the row between the two bands of fertilizer.

Potatoes are grown from the buds or eyes that are present on potatoes. You should purchase good seed potatoes, do not buy potatoes from the grocery store for planting. One pound of seed potatoes will make 9 to 10 seed pieces. To create seed pieces you should cut seed potatoes into about the size of a medium egg. Each seed piece needs at least one good bud. Seed pieces should be cut 6 days before planting in remain in a well ventilated spot until planting, this action will help to prevent rotting after plating.

Potatoes should be plated when soil temperature 4 inches deep reaches 50 degrees F. For Polk County this typically occurs in mid to late February. Plant the seed pieces three inches deep and 12 inches apart. Cover the seed with soil and pack the soil with your hands or feet. Moisture stress followed by irrigation or rainfall can cause cracks in potatoes. To prevent this keep soil moisture supply constant. Do not over water as this can cause rot or damage to the potatoes. Potatoes should be harvested when the tops begin to die and the potato skin becomes firm. This typically occurs around 95 to 110 days after planting.

Potatoes are one of the most popular vegetables in America. By planning now for your spring garden you can enjoy a bountiful potato harvest and can enjoy home grown French fries.

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