**Onions, February 6-12**

You can nearly feel spring in the air and many gardeners are getting anxious to start their spring gardens. Driving around town I have already seen feed stores advertising bulb onions in stock and have seen social media posts of local gardeners already planting their bulbs. Technically onions are a cool season crop, but they are started in late winter and harvested during the spring, thus they are typically grown in spring gardens in Polk County.

Onions come in a variety of colors and shapes from large bulbs to stick (bunching or green) type onions. Bulb onion varieties for Polk County include Bermuda, Crystal Wax, Early Grano 502, Granex, Red Burgundy, Yellow Sweet Spanish, and the very popular Yellow TX Super Sweet 1015. 1015 variety is the mainstay of bulb onion production not only in Texas gardens, but also Texas commercial onion production. Days to maturity vary greatly between varieties ranging from 60 to 125 days. Stick onion varieties include Evergreen Long White and Southport White and days to maturity is 65. Onion varieties are divided between three categories depending on hours of day light required: short day 11-12 hours, intermediate day 12-13 hours, and long day 14-16 hours.

Onions should always be planted in full sunlight and well drained soil. Soil should be well worked and all trash such as litter, sticks, and rocks should be removed to prevent misshaped bulbs. Onions can either be started via seed or transplants. Planting of seeds is far less popular than transplants. Seeds should be planted in October or December, while a targeted planting date for transplants in Polk County is February 15th. Seeds need to be planted one inch apart and will need to be thinned to one plant every 3 inches once plants become established. Transplants should be planted three inches apart. Fertilizer should be incorporated into soil either before or at time of planting.

Weed control is a major aspect of successful onion production. As weeds grow and their roots systems become larger and established, they can cause damage to developing onions. Special care should be taken when chopping weeds to prevent accidental damage to unseen onion bulbs in the ground. A second application of fertilizer should be applied when plants have five to six leaves. A soil test should be conducted to determine the type and amount of fertilizer to be applied. Insect issues are usually minimal in onions, but fungal diseases can be problematic. Fungal disease can cause brown spots on leaves and stems.

One of the great things about onions is they can be harvested at any time and when stored properly will remain fresh for weeks if not months. Young bulb onions can also be harvested as green onions. When stems become weak and begin to fall is a good sign bulb onions are ready to be harvested. Onions should be dried to prevent storage problems. A good technique is to remove the tops and roots and store in wire baskets or boxes. Garages are a popular storage location because they are dry and airy.

**Matthew R. March, MNRD**

County Extension Agent- Agriculture & Natural Resources

Polk County | Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service

602 E Church St Ste 127 Livingston, TX 77351

Phone: (936) 327-6828

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**Late Winter Management of Warm Season Turf Grasses, February 13-19**

I have already seen lawn mowers making their first appearance in lawns over the past couple of weeks. As seasons begin to change, clover is already actively growing in lawns across Polk County leading to homeowners cranking up the lawnmower. We are still several weeks away from the start of spring, but there are management activities you should be following now and during the next several weeks to ensure your lawn gets off to a great start this spring.

Unless you applied pre-emergent herbicides, your lawn will have cool season plants. These plants are the “green” you see in lawns during late winter and when left unchecked can compete with your warm season turf grass species when they begin to break dormancy. The most common cool season plants in lawns are annual blue grass, clover, and ryegrass. Post emergent herbicides can be applied to control these “cool season weeds”, however special caution should be taken to avoid damage to warm season turf grasses breaking dormancy. This issue is more prevalent during mild winters or early springs. If herbicides are not applied mowing can prevent cool season weeds from flowering and producing more seeds for next year.

Once your turf grass begins to green up and break dormancy you will need to follow proper mowing heights. Mowing should occur when grass reaches 1 to 2 inches in height. You should never scalp your lawn and you should never remove more then 1/3 of the leaf tissue at one mowing. Avoid applying fertilizer until the lawn is actively growing. This allows fertilizer to be utilized by your warm season turf grass and not cool season weeds. Fertilizing too early will encourage weed growth and will result and wasting your money on fertilizer. A good rule of thumb is to apply the first fertilizer application after the third mowing. Warm season turf grasses do not break dormancy until soil temperatures reach 65 degrees. Lawns are typically actively growing 2-3 weeks after soil temperatures reach 65 degrees. Current soil temperatures can be found with a quick google search.

February is also the ideal time to apply pre-emergent herbicides for some of our most unwanted summer weeds such as crab grass and goose grass. Lastly, February is a great time to conduct a pre-growing season audit of irrigation systems and fix any issues.

As you roll the lawn mower out of the garage for its maiden mowing of 2021 do not forget to perform some of the management activities we discussed today.

**Matthew R. March, MNRD**

County Extension Agent- Agriculture & Natural Resources

Polk County | Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service

602 E Church St Ste 127 Livingston, TX 77351

Phone: (936) 327-6828

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**White Bass, February 20-26**

Springtime brings many great traditions across east Texas. The white bass, *Morone chrysops*, or sand bass run is one of those great traditions. Anglers mark the warming weather with a trip to a local creek to target white bass as they swim upstream from large reservoirs to spawn.

White bass can be found statewide due to introductions and stockings except for the far northern reaches of the Texas Panhandle. Prior to stockings, white bass had a much-reduced range in Texas and were found only in the Red River drainage system. Thus, white bass were not native to Polk County, even though they are now one of our most popular game fish not only in Polk County but across the state where they rank fifth in most preferred species amongst anglers.

White bass can be found in a variety of habitats including lakes, ponds, and deep pools in rivers. White bass average a pond or less with some individuals weighing up to two pounds. The current state record was caught in 1977 out of the Colorado River and was 5.56 lbs. and 20.75 inches. The current water body record for Lake Livingston is 4.12 lbs. and 21 inches. This fish was caught by Matthew Smith in July of 1998. Even though white bass can be found in a variety of aquatic habitats they are mainly a large reservoir species. Large schools form in reservoirs where they feed on shad, their principal food source.

White bass are considered early spring spawners and may begin their trek from reservoirs or deep pools in rivers into small tributaries as early as the 1st of February. Schools of males will arrive in tributaries upwards of a month before females. Spawning activity occurs when water temperature is between 58 to 62 degrees. White bass are considered free spawners which means no nest are built. Spawning will occur mostly at night in very shallow water. Moving water is preferred but fish will still spawn if moving water is not present. Females can release upwards of half million eggs which are then fertilized by males. The eggs will then sink and attach to objects in the stream until the eggs hatch 2 to 3 days later. The adult and newly hatched fingerlings will then migrate back downstream to deeper water where they will remain until the following spring. Growth rate is about 8 inches in the first year and life expectancy averages 4 years.

The white bass run is an exciting time for angers including bank anglers as a boat is not needed to access many tributaries where spawning occurs. If you are lucky enough to time the spawn right, you can quickly fill the ice chest with fresh fish for supper.

**Matthew R. March, MNRD**

County Extension Agent- Agriculture & Natural Resources

Polk County | Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service

602 E Church St Ste 127 Livingston, TX 77351

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**Eggplant, February 27-March 5**

Eggplant may be one of the more unique vegetables you will find growing in gardens. It is not really considered an exotic vegetable, but it is also is not the standard of southern gardens like collard greens, okra, squash, and tomatoes. It may not look like it, but eggplant belongs to the nightshade family, which also includes potatoes and tomatoes. Eggplant originated in India and is know as a great source of fiber and vitamins such as iron and potassium.

To ensure a successful harvest, a site should be selected that is well drained and contain sandy loam soils. Soil pH should be between 5.5 and 7.2. For most sites in Polk County, soil pH is 5.5 or lower, thus an application of AG lime will need to occur to raise soil pH to acceptable levels. Eggplant comes in a variety of shapes from small and round to skinny and long. However, the most common varieties grown in Polk County are the traditional bell-shaped eggplant. Traditional varieties adapted to Polk County include Fairy Tale, Neon, and Purple Rain. Oriental varieties include Ichiban and Pingtung Long. Days to maturity averages 60 days.

Most growers chose to start eggplant from transplants; however, they can be started from seed. Seeds should be planted indoors or in a greenhouse 6 to 8 weeks prior to when they will be transplanted outdoors. Eggplant are very sensitive to frost and should not be planted outdoors until the threat of frost has passed and daytime temperatures are at least 65 degrees. The ideal planting date for Polk County is between April 1-15. Eggplant will become very large plants and transplants should be planted at least two feet apart. Fertilizer should be added at or before planting with a follow up application about a month later. Eggplant requires at least one inch of water per week. Eggplant are know to be susceptible to a variety of diseases. Good management practices will help to mitigate the risk of disease. This includes such practices as rotating crops, proper watering, proper plant spacing, and disposing of diseased plants.

Harvesting can occur at any time; however, older eggplant will contain large seeds and be less desirable. To test for ripeness, lightly press the side of the fruit with your thumbnail and if the indention stays then the fruit is ripe. Eggplant will remain fresh if stored in a refrigerator for about a week.

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