

Concho Valley Horticulture Update

February 2016

Good Plant Selection

What an interesting winter we've been having! It's been so warm and sunny that I feel like we must be in for an intense cold spell coming up at some point, just to balance out all the nice days.

Winter is a great time of year to assess the current landscape and make plans for improvements and changes, and winter is even a good time of year to plant trees and shrubs. When dreaming of the coming spring and the color and greenery that it brings, remember to use good plant selection. There are many wonderful plants that grow well in the Concho Valley climate and soil conditions that can provide lots of color, life and beauty to a yard. Just remember the phrase 'right plant, right spot.' Choose plants that are either native or well adapted to the local area, and plant them in the right spot – consider whether they need sun or shade, well-drained soil, good air circulation, etc.

One very helpful resource in plant selection is the Texas Superstar program from the Texas A&M Agrilife Extension Service. The Texas Superstar program puts plants through rigorous testing in field trials to determine which plants can thrive in the harsh Texas climate. It's great for the average homeowner, because "it means landscape success with beautiful, proven, Texas-tough plants." (Texas Superstar booklet). Visit the website texassuperstar.com to see all the plants that have the designation.

Some of the newest plants to receive the Texas Superstar designation include Little Ruby Alternanthera, a groundcover or container plant with deep burgundy foliage, White Stream Lobularia which is a heat tolerant type of allysum, and Basham's Party Pink Crapemyrtle which is a large tree form crape myrtle with lavender flowers and interesting bark.

Another good resource is the Earth-Kind Plant Selector, another Agrilife Extension program, which is found at earthkind.tamu.edu. For anyone interested in a local class that teaches landscape maintenance and design principles, as well as good plant selection for the Concho Valley, there will be an 'EarthKind Landscape School' class offered in April. Please contact the Tom Green County Extension Office at 325-659-6522 for more info.

So enjoy the nice sunny days when they're here – plant a tree or some shrubs if needed, grow a winter vegetable garden, or create a compost bin for fallen leaves and kitchen scraps. And during the gloomy, cold days (if they come), enjoy the anticipation of a coming spring.

February To-Do's

- Plant cool season annuals
- Apply Pre-emergent herbicide
- Plant and/or prune rose bushes
- Water 24 to 48 hours before hard freezes to protect plants
- Run irrigation system check
- Prune shade trees and shrubs as needed
- Check mowers and other lawn equipment; sharpen mower blades, get tune-up if needed

Pecan Update



February is a good time of year to start germinating pecans, if you'd like to try growing some from seed. Just be aware that improved, named varieties are propagated by cuttings -and trees grown from seed won't be the same as their parent. You may get some good trees though!

Applying Horticultural Oil

Now is a good time of year to take care of any scale insect problems you may have in your landscape. Red bud trees, holly shrubs and other plants can sometimes be infested with scale, which is often hard to see on the plant. There are many different kinds; some are called armored scales, and once they latch on to a plant they form a protective waxy shield and don't move. Others may have a cottony appearance and move around the plants.

Scale insects often secrete honeydew, a sticky clear substance that can build up on plants. The honeydew often attracts sooty mold, a fungus that is not generally pathogenic to plants but helps indicate the presence of insect pests. Usually, horticultural oil only has to be applied once per year and is pretty effective at controlling insects. It's also not as harsh on the environment as many other types of pesticides.

Always follow the label directions when applying products to control pests. But here are some general tips for using horticultural oil. First, make sure to apply in the right weather conditions. Horticultural oil is, like the name says, an oily substance and if applied in hot weather can scorch plant tissue. Wait for a day that's between 45 and 70 degrees, and when no rain is forecasted for a few days. Some products will be ready to spray, and others may have directions for mixing and diluting. Again, follow the label directions, especially if spraying fruit trees that are beginning to come out of dormancy.

If you have woody shrubs or small trees that are performing poorly, or are covered in sticky honeydew, take a careful look to see if there is a scale infestation. If so, take control now while horticultural oil is an option – spring and summer is too hot to apply it.

Plant Spotlight

'Silver Peso' Texas Mountain Laurel *Sophora secundiflora* 'Silver Peso'

This interesting variation on the standard Texas Mountain Laurel is a beautiful, drought tolerant, evergreen small tree that is perfect for water conserving landscapes.





Replenish Mulch

Right now is a good time of year to take a look at shrub and flower beds to see if mulch needs to be replenished. It's nice to do it while it's cool outside, because carrying around those large bags and raking to spread it out can be hard work.

Mulch is just a layer of material covering the soil surface. It can be organic, such as shredded bark, wood chips, grass clippings, fallen leaves, and so on. Inorganic mulch would consist of things like rocks, shredded rubber, or plastic.

Mulch does several things for plants. First, it conserves moisture. Up to two-thirds of the water applied to shrubs can evaporate if unmulched. Since water costs you money, it makes sense to save it as much as possible.

Also, mulch shades the soil and helps moderate soil temperature. It can keep soil warmer in winter and cooler in summer.

Mulch also reduces soil erosion in areas of bare soil.

One of the best reasons to use mulch though is that it reduces weeds. Mulch shades out weeds and prevents them from germinating. But to get the full benefit of mulch, it has to be deep enough – make sure the layer is about 3 inches deep or there won't be much benefit.

If you use organic mulch, such as shredded bark, it will break down over time. While you may think this sounds like a bad thing, it's actually a great thing! As mulch breaks down, it decomposes into rich organic matter that loosens up the soil, adds nutrients, and improves the structure.

Check Irrigation Systems

Irrigation systems are a huge asset to a home landscape because they make plant care easier. But they do need some maintenance to keep them working and efficient, so they don't waste water.

To get your system ready for spring, check out how it runs and get it adjusted or repaired if needed. The automatic timer should be turned off in the winter time. Plants will need to be watered occasionally, but not by the timer. Only water when they need it. So to audit your system and inspect how well it's working, turn the timer on for a test run. Make each station run and go out and watch.

First, make sure each station turns on, and all sprinkler heads popped up, rotated, and sprayed correctly. If not, check for obstructions such as grass or soil. You may need an irrigation professional to take a look. If you have a geyser, get it fixed right away - that's a huge waste of water.

Next, look carefully at where the sprinklers are spraying and see if they are aligned properly. If any sprinkler is watering the driveway or street, adjust it to only water the plants.

If there are any problems you can't fix yourself, call an irrigation contractor out to make repairs. Now is a good time to get someone; they get really busy in the spring.

Another step is an efficiency audit. Water costs money, so you don't want to waste it. You can do a basic one yourself, or get a professional to do an in-depth audit.

To do it yourself, evenly set out 8 low flat cans such as tuna or cat food cans. You will audit one station at a time. Turn the station on, and run it 30 minutes. Measure the depth of water in each can. If each can has the same amount of water, you have even distribution. If not, the system needs some work.



Pre-Emergent for the Landscape

Pre-emergent is a type of herbicide that kills seeds as they germinate. It won't instantly rid a yard of a weed infestation, but if used properly over time pre-emergent will greatly reduce the amount of troublesome weeds in the lawn.

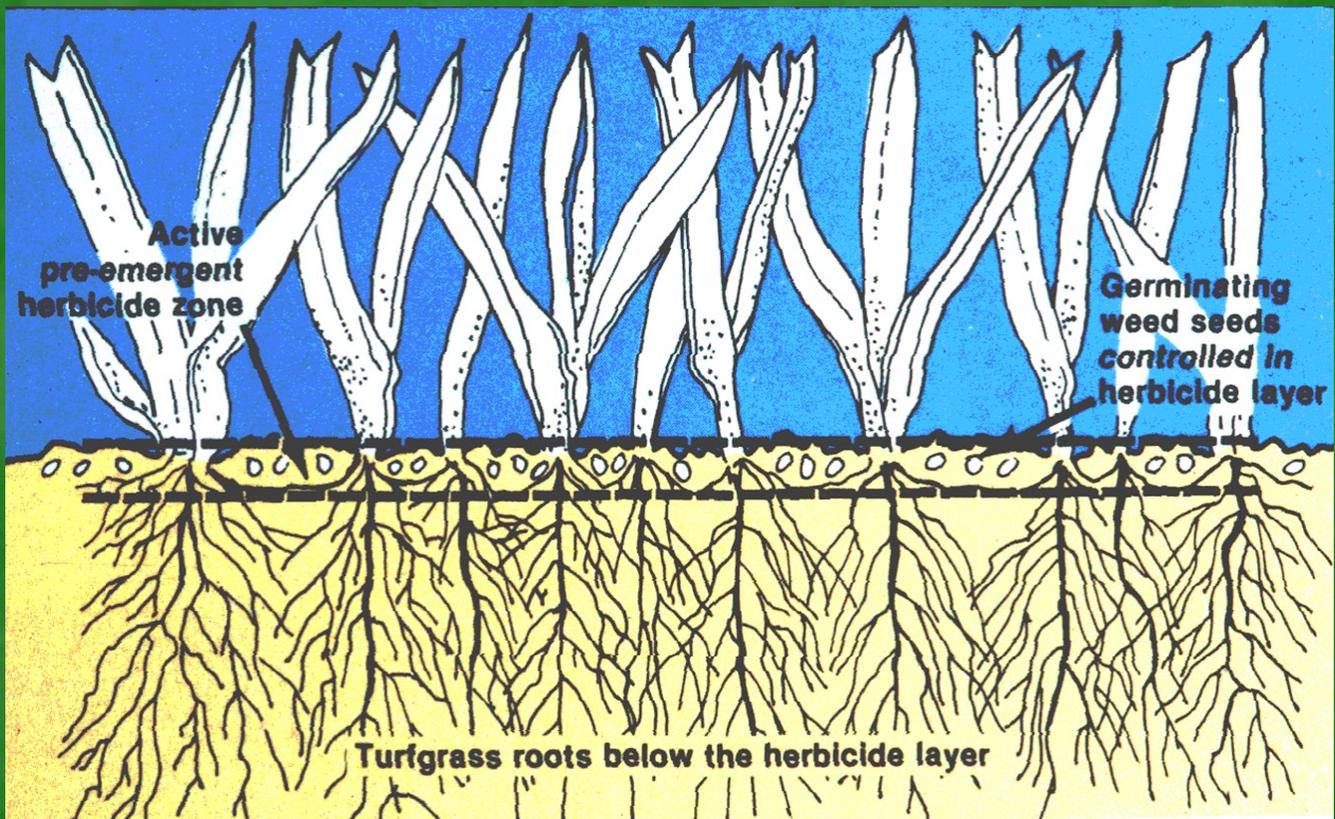
Pre-emergent is most affective against annual weeds, but it can help somewhat even with perennial weeds, by preventing new plants from popping up by seed.

The key to achieving good control with pre-emergent is timing. The product must be applied before weeds come up – but you don't have to be a psychic to know when to apply. Pre-emergent herbicides will last up to several months. For winter weeds, apply in the fall (September) and for spring weeds apply in the winter (right now in February). One additional application can be made in May to prevent grassburs ('stickers') which pop up in the summer, if needed.

Pre-emergent is highly recommended for lawns - it does not harm established, existing plants as long as it is applied following label directions. So there is no danger of harming the grass, shade trees, shrubs, or other landscape plants as long as they are well-established (which just means they need to have healthy root systems and have not been just recently planted).

Applying pre-emergent is not recommended in vegetable gardens, and in shrub and flower beds it depends on specific circumstances; do not use it if you plan on doing any planting there, even transplants. The tender root systems can be damaged. But for well-established beds, where no future planting is planned, it may be an option.

Pre-emergent can be purchased at garden centers, nurseries and horticulture supply stores. Some examples are pendimethalin (trade names Pendulum, Pre-M, Anderson 11-3-11), benefin (trade name Balan) or XL-2G which contains benefin and oryzalin)



Classes & Programs

February 2016

Friday, February 19, 12:00pm

Lunch N Learn Class - *Spring Forward!*

Instructor - Allison Watkins

Location: Tom Green County Extension Office

Judge Edd B. Keyes Bldg, 113 W Beauregard

Cost: \$5

Spring will be here soon, get a head start by learning what to do to be prepared for the coming growing season!



Master Gardener Training Course

Join the Master Gardeners! Cost: \$175, includes lunches and textbook. Classes will be Tuesdays from 12pm to 3pm, February 23 through May 31. Call 325-659-6528 for info.

For more information on any of the topics, or to ask questions please contact:



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