

# Concho Valley Horticulture Update

February 2017

## Pruning Shrubs

This time of year there are always many questions about pruning shrubs and woody vines, and how far back they can be pruned. Whether the plant needs to be reduced in size just because it's too big and overcrowding other things, is damaged or diseased, or for whatever reason, the dormant winter season is generally the best time of year to prune shrubs.

An exception would be those that flower in the early spring (like climbing roses, Indian hawthorn and Texas mountain laurel – those are best left until after flowering, so you don't miss out on the flower show).

As far as how much can be pruned – the general guideline is the one-third rule. The plant is generally ok if you don't remove more than a third of the plant in one season or pruning session. There are always exceptions of course, some plants are pretty persistent and will resprout vigorously even if you cut it down to the ground.

For shrubs, another guideline is to not go so deep with pruning that you get into nothing but sticks – that is, twigs and branches with no leaves. If you need to significantly reduce a shrub, prune back the entire branch down to the trunk. Hand tools are better for shrubs, they give you more control and result in a better shape and quality plant.

If you are constantly trimming to reduce size because it's growing too large, you'd probably be better off replacing that plant with a smaller, dwarf species.



**Don't top crape myrtles!**

Whatever you do – don't top shrubs or trees. Topping is a common, but bad pruning practice. Many people top off crape myrtles especially, this time of year; so remember to 'just say no' to topping.

Thinning is the correct approach to pruning; topping creates ugly, unhealthy growth and weakens the structure of the plant.

## 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. They may turn into pretty nice trees though!

## Plant Asparagus

There aren't as many landscaping and gardening chores to do this time of year, but on the nice days take care of jobs like pruning and winter vegetable maintenance. And one task to do this time of year (January through February) is plant asparagus.

Asparagus is a great vegetable to grow for many reasons – it can tolerate our salty, alkaline soil and water, it is one of the very few perennial vegetables that we can grow, and it's healthy and delicious! The only drawback to planting asparagus is, since it's a perennial crop and will last for years, it does take time to get well established before harvesting. Asparagus should be allowed to grow for two years from planting crowns without harvesting, or three years from seed. That may seem like a long way off, but it is a nice looking plant and the time will pass anyway – might as well have some asparagus developing.

Since it is a fairly permanent fixture in the yard, choose a good spot to plant the asparagus. It makes a nice background plant in beds or border plant along fences, but should not be included in the garden with the annual vegetables that get tilled up regularly. It produces best in full sun, but that can get quite hot so a little afternoon shade is not a bad thing. Asparagus needs well drained soil, so till in plenty of good quality compost before planting.

Purchase asparagus crowns from a local nursery or gar-

den center, or order from a seed catalog. Dig furrows about six to twelve inches deep, and space the crowns at least twelve inches apart. Cover firmly with an inch of compost and two or three inches of soil. Over the coming season, finish filling the trenches as the shoots grow. Water thoroughly after planting, and water every week or so after emerging (depending on rainfall and temperature).

Keep the area around the asparagus weed free – the plants need to be able to grow vigorously for the first few years, and weeds will compete and interfere with nutrient and water absorption. A thick layer of



mulch will help. After investing a couple of years establishing asparagus, it will require very little care to keep it producing well. Harvest spears frequently each spring, before they get tough and fibrous, for about six weeks. After spring, allow spears to develop into ferns and grow for the rest of the season.

For more info on growing asparagus, visit [http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/vegetable/files/2010/10/E-503\\_asparagus.pdf](http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/vegetable/files/2010/10/E-503_asparagus.pdf)

## Plant Spotlight

### Grandma's Yellow Rose *Rosa 'Nacogdoches'*

While many rose bushes that bloom large bouquet quality flowers can be difficult to keep healthy, Grandma's Yellow rose is a star performer that has earned the Texas Superstar designation and is considered by some as the 'Yellow Rose of Texas.'



## Plan Before Pruning

February is a big month for pruning. Pruning is best done during this time of year for many plants because they are dormant. There are some exceptions, but for most trees the dormant season is ideal. Minor pruning can be done year round if needed, and dead or damaged limbs should be removed any time of year.

Some good reasons to prune would be to train the plant into a specific shape, to maintain plant health for certain species, to improve flowers, fruit or foliage, to restrict growth, or to remove damaged, dead, or unsightly branches.

Unless the tree matches any of these situations, it probably doesn't need to be pruned. **Good plant selection and spacing usually prevents the need for extensive pruning, so choose the best types when possible and plant with plenty of space.**

When you get ready to prune, come up with a plan before any cutting starts. This is the order you should go: first, remove dead, broken or diseased limbs. This might be all that's required. Next, remove any branch that is rubbing or touching another branch. Leave the stronger or better positioned one. Third, remove any branch that is growing in the same direction or space as the one next to it. Next, take off any branches crossing the wrong way through canopy.

The fifth step is to remove branches that are aimed toward the ground. Then remove all suckers and water sprouts. These vigorous shoots are unattractive and unnecessary.

If you have oak trees that need pruning, be sure to get them done right away because waiting any later will increase the risk for the possibility of the tree getting oak wilt.

When deciding between two branches, keep the one that has a larger branch angle. Branches that are narrowly attached to the tree are much weaker than branches that come out wider from the trunk.

Try to visualize a straight central trunk, wide angled branches coming off of it, each going in a different direction. If you had a bird's eye view of the tree, the branches should be arranged like the spokes on a wheel.

## Colorful Annuals

Just because it's winter doesn't mean we should give up on having a nice colorful porch or patio. Many landscape plants are dormant and brown, but having a few large planters around the outside of the home will really kick up the curb appeal, and will be nice to enjoy on the warmer days when it feels good sit outside.

There are several really good winter annuals like pansies, stock, larkspur, alyssum and snapdragons. Cyclamen is another great winter annual. Cyclamen from a garden center, not a florist, will do well in outside planters.

Cyclamen comes in various shades of pink, red and white. So if you want to give someone some flowers for valentine's day, consider some garden cyclamens that can be enjoyed for months. They will be able to handle cold temperatures down to about the high 20's, so if a hard freeze comes they should be protected.

Dianthus, also called pinks, are another good flower for winter patio color. They are generally considered annuals, but in conditions that are just right they may come back as a perennial. Dianthus come in different shades of pink and white, and will bloom through the rest of the winter into the spring until it gets hot.

When planting patio pots, you can make some stunning flower displays if you use different sizes and shapes of plants. Remember the term 'thrillers, fillers and spillers.' Plant one thing in the center that draws attention, the add filler plants and spiller plants to go down the sides of the pot like the alyssum.

Always use a potting mix for container plants, don't buy a bag labeled garden soil or use soil dug from the ground. Potting mix is peat moss based, and real soil turns hard like a brick when used in pots.



## Improve Soil With Compost

Many people tend to skip over the step of soil improvement when they decide to plant a garden or flower bed. If you're going to plant cactus, agave or some native, desert plant then that's fine – they can handle the native soil. But if you want to grow vegetables, flowers, or shrubs, most of them will require (or at least grow much better in) soil that has been improved with compost.

Right now is a great time of year to work on soil improvement, and the first step is to do a soil test. Visit the website [soiltesting.tamu.edu](http://soiltesting.tamu.edu) to print out a form and instructions on how to submit a soil sample. The Texas A&M Soil testing lab will analyze the various nutrient levels in the soil relative to what you are going to grow, and also the pH.

It won't tell you things like if there are contaminants or diseases, but it provides some good insight into how to care for your plants.

The test is pretty easy, the hard part of improving soil is the physical labor. The key to getting better soil is incorporating compost. Whether is composted farm manure, store bought compost or homemade compost, any kind of plant based compost will improve any kind of soil.

Compost will open up heavy, hard soil and make it easier to work; Compost improves soil drainage and aeration, and also provides nutrients. It also helps promote a good balance of microbes that are needed for plants to be able to get nutrients from the soil.

So any time you want to start a garden or planting bed, don't forget to dig up the soil well, apply 3 inches of compost and mix it in well. It makes a big difference in plant performance.



## Apply Pre-Emergent

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 late winter (right now in February to early March). 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.

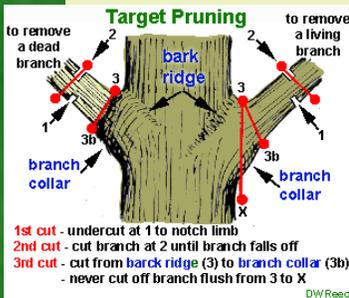
Pre-emergent can be purchased at garden centers, nurseries and horticulture supply stores. Some examples include pendimethalin (trade names Pendulum, Pre-M, Anderson 11-3-11), benefin (trade name Balan) or XL-2G.

# Classes & Programs

February 2017

## Master Gardener Training Course

Join the Master Gardeners! Cost: \$175, includes lunches and textbook. Classes will be Tuesdays from 12pm to 3pm, February 21 through May 30. Deadline to register—Feb 14; call 325-659-6528.



Friday, February 17, 12:00pm

## Lunch N Learn Class - Tree Care

Location: Tom Green County Extension Office

Judge Edd B. Keyes Bldg, 113 W Beauregard

Cost: \$5

Learn about basic tree care for west Texas, including best species to plant, how to plant, how to prune and more.



*Coming Soon:*

## Earth-Kind Landscape School

Save the date! This four evening course will cover tree care, lawn care, and plant selection specifically for the Concho Valley, as well as landscape design principles. Attendees will learn skills needed to create a beautiful landscape that can thrive in west Texas. More details to follow, but call 325-659-6528 to be put on a mailing list for when info is available. March 20, 21, 27, & 28th 2017.



Earth-Kind.  
*Landscape School*

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

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