

# Concho Valley Horticulture Update

March 2016

## Don't Forget to Improve Soil

Good soil preparation is a very important step to consider when planting new beds or garden plots, but it's often ignored or skipped. There are many nice native and desert style plants that can thrive in existing soil, but in order to plant anything else (shrubs, vegetables, turfgrass) our soil needs to be improved. I get asked a lot of questions about fertilizers – what's the best kind for specific plants, etc. But if soil is properly amended, many plants won't need much fertilizer. If soil is *not* amended, and is not in the right condition for planting, many plants won't thrive no matter how well they are watered, fertilized, pruned and cared for.

Since planting requires an investment of time, money and effort, don't forget the important first step of soil improvement. It's still too early to plant the spring garden or put out spring and summer flowers, but it's a great time of year to get the soil ready – so take advantage of a nice cool spring day and give plants the best environment possible when they do get planted.



A good way to start is to do a soil test through the soils lab at Texas A&M University. Visit the website [soiltesting.tamu.edu](http://soiltesting.tamu.edu) for instructions. Simply dig some soil in several spots in the area of interest, mix together in a bucket for a composite sample, and remove any rocks or leaves. Mail the sample with the form to the lab to find out the soil pH, nutrient

levels, and more. Then, organic matter needs to be incorporated into the soil. Till or dig up the beds and add a three inch deep layer of organic matter, then mix it in as deep as possible. Organic matter will improve drainage, aeration, nutrient absorption, and soil structure. There are many good options for plant-based organic matter, ranging from composted cotton bur hulls, composted farm manure, bagged compost from a nursery or garden center, or homemade compost made in the backyard from yard scraps like fallen leaves and grass clippings.

Just don't try to mix different soil types together. Adding sandy soil to clay soil or vice versa just ends up making things worse. If different soil textures are mixed together it can form a tighter, harder structure than before. And if layered, one soil type on top of another, it creates problems with water infiltration and root penetration.

## March To-Do's

- Divide summer and fall flowering perennials and ornamental grasses
- Avoid purchasing bare-root trees and roses this late in the season - instead choose container grown or B&B
- Prepare soil in beds by tilling in 3 inches of compost
- Don't plant frost-sensitive plants too early. The last frost in the Concho Valley can be as late as mid April

## Pecan Update



Spring is a good time to start fertilizing. Once leaves emerge and the tree is actively growing, apply nitrogen fertilizer. If you'd like a good crop of pecans, applying zinc is very beneficial - apply any time there is new growth in the leaves. Start at bud break, Zinc must be applied as a foliar spray, and is not absorbed through the soil.

## Master Gardener Plant Sale

Good plant selection will go a long way to providing a healthy, beautiful landscape. Try to only plant things that are well adapted to our soil and weather conditions. Even with this stipulation there are many, many beautiful plants that will work great in the Concho Valley.

Locally owned nurseries provide lots of good plant options that are right for our climate, and another way to see some good plant choices is to check out the Concho Valley Master Gardener's annual plant sale.

The Concho Valley Master Gardener program is a volunteer organization dedicated to providing community education and programming to the public. They undergo extensive training in horticulture, and then provide volunteer hours to the Concho Valley to receive official status as a certified master gardener.

The Concho Valley Master Gardeners put a lot of time and effort into their plant sale because it raises money for educational programs for the community.

They spend months propagating everything they sell – they grow all their own plants right here in San Angelo, all from seeds or cuttings.

There will be thousands of plants offered at the plant sale, in many different types and varieties. Options include tomatoes, vines, trees, lots of perennials, and hanging baskets. They are all plants that will thrive in the conditions of the Concho valley, and there will be some unique and unusual ones to choose from.

This year's plant sale will be held Saturday, April 2nd with doors opening at 8am. It will be at the Tom Green County 4H center, which is located at 3168 N. US Highway 67 (next door to the animal shelter). So save the date for this great opportunity, Saturday April 2nd.

If you have any questions, please call the county extension office at 325-659-6528.



## Plant Spotlight

### Arctic Frost Satsuma

*Citrus reticulata* 'Arctic Frost'

This cold hardy citrus tree is a newly designated "Texas Superstar" Plant (see [texassuperstar.com](http://texassuperstar.com)) and is cold hardy to 9 degrees Fahrenheit. It is cold hardy in zone 8 but requires winter protection the first two years in order to get established. Plant in early spring after the last frost.





## Thinning Fruit Trees

Thinning fruits and vegetables is one of the hardest things for a home gardener to do. When starting vegetables from seed, we just scatter them down the rows – depending on the crop, it's not always feasible to plant each seed in the exact right spot with the correct spacing. So after the seeds germinate, it's important to pull the extra plants that are too close. If you don't they won't get as big or productive as they should.

Most fruit trees also need to be thinned - such as peaches, plums, and apples. And the sooner it's done, the better.

Thin out young fruit before it's the size of a dime. Stone fruit like peaches should be thinned out and spaced about 4 to 6 inches between fruits. Simply pick off and throw away the fruit along the branches, leaving only one for every 6 inches or so. Apples should be thinned to one or two fruit per cluster.

There are two major reasons for thinning fruit trees - for the health of the tree, and for better quality fruit. If all the fruit is left on the tree, it will take up a lot of energy and nutrients and can stress the tree. It will also weigh down the branches, so much that they can even break and fall off.

Thinning also improves the fruit that is left. If not thinned, the fruit is much smaller. If you thin out the branches, the remaining fruit is large and sweet and better quality.

It may seem like you're losing fruit, but you will still end up with the same total weight of fruit - you won't have as many, but they will be larger.

Don't wait too long, and get the thinning done as early as possible - if you wait until the fruit is starting to mature, it won't make a difference.

## Spring Plant Diseases

We're getting into spring now, and the weather is nice for getting outside and working in the yard and garden. But unfortunately, disease pests also like the spring climate just like gardeners and plants.

If it's a dry spring, we probably won't have many diseases to deal with. But we always hope for a lot of rain – and if it's humid, we will probably have some issues.

Brown patch is one of the most common turfgrass diseases, and can affect St. Augustine and bermuda grasses. The symptoms will depend on the type of grass, but generally include rings or patches in turfgrass that appear burned or dead. To prevent or manage the disease, avoid over fertilizing, don't apply nitrogen when the disease is active, mow a little higher, and irrigate only in the morning. There are also several fungicide options available at nurseries and horticultural supply stores.

Something that hasn't been spotted in the Concho Valley yet but should be monitored is a disease called rose rosette. It has become a major problem in the DFW area and is devastating a lot of rose bushes. It is a virus that is spread through a vector called the eriophyte mite. The main symptoms are various signs of distorted growth - witches broom effect, elongated new canes, and lots of extra thorns on affected stems. If any roses show suspicious signs of rose rosette, please contact the Extension Office.



## Turfgrass Tips

We all enjoy having a nice soft, green lawn but here in west Texas, it's pretty challenging to keep the grass alive and the stickers out. The basic steps for keeping a lawn healthy are proper soil management, irrigation, fertilization and mowing. The best defense against weeds is a thick, healthy lawn – so if those jobs are done right, there won't be many weeds to fight. But weed control is another step to take in order to get the lawn back into good shape if it's gotten weedy.

Scientific research has shown that the depth of roots has the biggest impact on how well grass can survive heat and drought conditions. Believe it or not, not matter what kind of grass you have – whether St. Augustine, Bermuda or buffalo – it can survive the harsh west Texas climate if you promote deep rooting.

The first tip for promoting deep grass roots is good quality, deep soil. If planting a new lawn, be sure to till and loosen up the soil and incorporate compost as deep as possible. For older, existing lawns, use an aerator machine and top dress with compost.

Watering practices also have a major impact on root depth. The key to watering plants is to water deep and thoroughly, but infrequently. Watering really deeply but not very often will make a big difference and help roots grow deeper. Lawns should not be watered more than once a week. An inch of irrigation, applied once a week will keep established lawns going even when it's hot and dry.

Mowing also makes a big difference. Mow often enough that you're only cutting off one-third of the height of the grass. Frequent mowing will help the lawn stay attractive.

## Spring Pecan Tree Care

Pecans are a big part of horticulture in the Concho Valley. They are beautiful landscape shade trees, and are also grown commercially in orchards. Pecans can do well here because the low humidity helps prevent scab disease, a common problem that happens east of here. But Pecans still have a lot of maintenance requirements, and need lots of water to produce well and be healthy landscape trees.

Newly planted trees will need at least 7 to 10 gallons of water per week, and mature trees will need as much as 50 inches per year total, including rainfall. Fertility is also a concern - zinc should be applied at bud break and at every flush of growth, and nitrogen should be applied every six to 8 weeks during the growing season.

Common pests that can damage nuts are pecan nut casebearers and weevils. Timing is very important to get good control.

We manage a mailing list for anyone interested in pecans, and will send out announcements each spring and fall regarding the proper timing and recommended spray dates for case bearers and weevils. It's free to join, just contact the extension office at 325-659-6528 to sign up.

Right now, nitrogen should be applied. A commonly available fertilizer with the formulation 21-0-0 should be given at the rate of 1 pound per inch of trunk diameter. Water is the key though, the reason many pecans are struggling or dying is lack of water.



# Classes & Programs

March 2016

Friday, March 18, 12:00pm

## Lunch N Learn Class - EarthKind Landscaping

Instructor - Allison Watkins

Location: Tom Green County Extension Office

Judge Edd B. Keyes Bldg, 113 W Beauregard

Cost: \$5

Earth-Kind landscaping is a collection of research-proven techniques to create a beautiful, successful landscape while still protecting natural resources. Earth-Kind landscaping promotes water conservation, reduction of pesticide and fertilizer use, and reduction of wastes going into landfills. Learn about soil management, plant selection and more!



Saturday, April 2nd - 8:00am

## Master Gardener Plant Sale

Location: Tom Green 4-H Center, 3168 N. US Highway 67 (next to animal shelter)

Don't miss this opportunity to purchase some great plants at a reasonable price! All plants are locally grown by Concho Valley Master Gardeners, and all proceeds go to community educational projects.

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



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Educational programs of the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service are open to all people without regard to race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, genetic information or veteran status.