

Concho Valley Horticulture Update

May 2016

Protecting Pollinators

Now that it's warm and green outside, there is a lot of insect activity. Gardeners know that while some insects are damaging and can be pests, there are also a lot of insects that we need to have around for a successful garden.



Beneficial insects include predators and parasitoids that help keep pests controlled, and pollinators. The most commonly known pollinators are bees and butterflies, but there are others such as hummingbirds, beetles, ants, wasps, and moths. Bees pollinate the largest number of plant species, but all are important.

Some examples of plants that need pollinators would be squash, peaches, tomatoes and melons.

The reason pollination is so important is because plants will not produce fruit or seeds without fertilization, and many plants need pollen from separate plants to do so. Insects help take pollen from plant to plant so flowers can be fertilized.

If vegetable plants have flowers but they don't turn into fruit, a lack of pollinator insects could be the problem. Try using a small paintbrush and dab into each flower to spread the pollen, and for the future make efforts to attract and maintain populations of pollinators. Try planting pollinator-friendly plants such as bee balm, salvia, and milkweed. Also, be very careful with insecticides and avoid using them if possible. If needed, use products that are not broad-spectrum and apply only where needed, keeping beneficial insects in mind.

And don't forget about the other beneficials, the ones help keep pest insects controlled by killing them – predators by eating them, and parasitoids by laying eggs in the pest and then parasitizing it. Lady beetles, green lacewings, dragonflies are some examples of good predators.



If there is a question as to whether an insect is a pest or not, please contact the Extension Office for help identifying.

May To-Do's

- Change irrigation timer over to summer watering from the spring schedule
- Apply glyphosate ('Roundup') carefully around bed edges to keep bermuda grass from creeping in
- Replenish mulch around beds to conserve water and maintain plant health

Pecan Update



The pecan nut casebearer is an important pest to monitor for right now, use scouting methods in the orchard or visit <http://pecan.ipmpipe.org> to check the forecast map. Timing is critical for good control, contact the Extension Office if you have questions

Solarizing Soil

Now that summer is about here, it's a good time to solarize a garden plot if there's a section that struggles with disease and insect infestation. Soil solarization is a method used to kill weed seeds and will also kill plant disease organisms using nothing but the heat of the sun and some clear plastic.

You can use soil sterilization in vegetable gardens as well as landscape areas, but the drawback is that it can only be used in a spot that will not have plants for about two months during the summer. There can't be any plant material in the spot that is being solarized. This does work pretty good in vegetable gardens in spots where the spring crops have been harvested and will be bare until fall gardening begins, but it's not a good option if you have a summer garden.

The first thing to do is prepare the soil. You'll want to prepare the bed for planting, so that when you take the plastic off at the end, it's ready to go and you won't have to disturb the soil. That would just bring more pests to the surface. Till up the area thoroughly, break up large clods and remove plant material. Make the area smooth and well tilled.

Next, irrigate the area. Having moisture in the

soil will increase the heat under the plastic. Irrigate thoroughly, but don't create puddles.

The next step is to dig a trench around the area, so that you can bury the edges of the plastic.

Then lay the plastic. The material should be clear, and uv stable. Stretch it as tightly as possible, into the trench and then fill the trench to hold it in place. Leave it as long as possible, from 4 to 8 weeks during the hottest part of the summer.



Plant Spotlight

Kangaroo Paw

Anigozanthus flavidus 'Pink Joey'

This is a lovely drought tolerant plant that is good when used as an accent or in mass planting. It is considered an annual and is only cold hardy to 30 degrees, but has survived mild winters in the Concho Valley.



Aerating the Lawn

Most homeowners know that to keep a lawn healthy and beautiful it needs to be watered, fertilized and mowed. Another maintenance practice that is sometimes needed is aeration.

Aeration is the use of a large mechanical device called an aerator to poke holes in the turf and into the soil. There are two different types of aerators, one is a spike aerator and one is a core aerator. The spike pokes solid metal tines into the soil while the core aerator uses hollow metal cylinders that actually pull out soil cores.

Plant roots need loose soil that has lots of oxygen to be healthy, but due to lots of foot traffic and other factors, the soil can become heavy and tight like a brick. If you've ever had a plumbing line dug or irrigation system installed, you probably noticed how green and healthy the grass grew in over the dug areas.

Using an aerator to loosen up the soil of a lawn will create an environment that is easier for roots to grow in, and provides needed oxygen. Aerating can also help reduce thatch problems. Be sure to flag sprinkler heads so they aren't damaged.

It's best to use a core aerator rather than a spike aerator. A spike aerator is not very effective while a core aerator that actually removes a little of the soil creates room for the remaining soil to spread out and loosen up. Just be sure to flag all sprinkler heads and anything else in the lawn that you don't want to get damaged by the machine.

Aeration doesn't need to be done every year, but can really make a difference in older lawns with compacted soil, or new construction homes with soil compacted by equipment.



Diagnosing Tree Problems

Now that the trees are all leafed out and putting on their new growth, I've received some questions and concerns about tree health. There are many things that can cause stress in trees – including too little water, insect pests, diseases, nutrient deficiency, and herbicide damage.

Trees can be very slow to show stress, and the larger the tree the longer it might take to show symptoms – that can make it hard to diagnose what's wrong, because the problem could have happened several years ago.

Water is the biggest issue, and trees that need a good bit of water like pecans are the ones showing the most damage. Be sure to water trees when there's no rain, and the water should be applied near the drip line, not around the trunk. The drip line is the ground underneath the edge of the tree's canopy.

Whenever there are stressed or damaged trees, there are often signs of borer infestation. Borers are beetles that have a larval stage that tunnels through tree limbs to feed. If there are signs of borers such as bubbling, foaming sap and small shot holes in the trunk and branches, they need to be controlled.

But borers are secondary pests, and are usually not the direct cause of the tree stress or damage, but are taking advantage of the problem and can make it worse. A systemic insecticide like imidacloprid can be applied to the ground and watered in to provide some control.

If your tree has some unusual or unexplained die back or problems, herbicide damage may be the cause. Always be careful with weedkillers - they can damage trees. Some can be safe to use near trees, but you have to be very careful.

Growing Pumpkins

Pumpkins are a big icon for fall and Halloween, and it's a lot of fun to grow your own - kids especially like them because the seeds are large, they germinate fast, and produce a large plant with big leaves pretty quickly.

Now is the time to get pumpkins planted. Depending on the type of pumpkin, it can take anywhere from two and a half months to four months to grow a mature pumpkin.

Pumpkin plants are very large and take up quite a bit of space, so you'll need to have plenty of room for them to spread out. They like to have well drained soil, and don't do as well in heavy soils with poor drainage.

You'll need a spot of full sun that's about ten feet by ten feet. Plant on two foot spacing; this will be more plants than you need, but some seeds might not come up, and extras can be thinned out.

They will need to be kept moist when germinating, then decrease the frequency of watering. Once established, the plants will need a deep thorough watering every week or two, depending on the weather.

If you want to grow the largest pumpkin possible, start with the right seeds - it needs to be a variety that has the genetics to get large. Then once the vine starts producing pumpkins, select the two biggest and keep removing all other pumpkins and flowers through the season - then all the energy will go to the largest.

Sunflowers

Sunflowers are a great addition to the summer garden. In the home landscape, they provide a bright pop of color and interest and also provide food for desirable birds. Sunflowers are an important agriculture crop, and are grown in fields to produce seeds and oil. They are also edible, and were an important food crop to native people in the American continent.

These summery bloomers range in size from a few feet tall to 15 feet tall, and there are many different varieties with varying colors.

Some sunflowers are perennials, while many are annuals. You can tell the difference by looking at the root system - annual sunflowers have a simple fibrous root system, looking like small strings, while a perennial sunflower will have roots that thicken into tough storage tubers.

Sunflowers need full sun to grow, but are pretty adaptable to other conditions such as soil type, and are fairly drought tolerant.

Sunflowers are great to grow with children. They love to watch the giant varieties grow fast and like to track their heights. You can also plant them in a circular pattern and create a teepee style playhouse space for the kids to hide out in. It's fun to watch how the flower heads can move throughout the day, always staying facing the sun as it tracks across the sky.



The People/Plant Connection, a local non-profit organization, is hosting a giant pumpkin and sunflower growing contest this year, and are giving out free giant sunflower and pumpkin seeds. Contact the People/Plant Connection for more info at 656-3104.

Classes & Programs

May 2016

Tuesday, May 10, 6:30pm

Community Seminar - Landscaping with Native Plants



Instructor - Kay Thompson

Location: Tom Green 4-H Building

3168 N. US Highway 67 (next door to animal shelter)

Cost: FREE

Join the Master Gardeners for an educational seminar on utilizing native plants in the landscape, and learn about the many colorful, beautiful plants that we can grow that are also very tough and hardy!

Friday, May 20, 12:00pm

Lunch N Learn Class - Vegetable Gardening

Instructor - Allison Watkins

Location: Tom Green County Extension Office

Judge Edd B. Keyes Bldg, 113 W Beauregard

Cost: \$5

Growing a productive vegetable garden can be a challenge in west Texas, but with a little knowledge and practice it can be done! Learn what to plant when, and find out the basic techniques for a plentiful harvest.



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



Allison Watkins
Texas A&M Agrilife Extension
Tom Green County
113 W Beauregard
San Angelo, TX 76903
325-659-6528

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.