Concho Valley Horticulture Update

June 2015

Summer Turf Tips

We all would like to have a nice green lawn to relax in and make the home beautiful. Here in west Texas, achieving that is possible but challenging, and many of us struggle to keep the lawn alive, much less green and lush.

The drought and heat that we often have can cause lawns to become thinned and weak, creating dead spots and allowing weeds to flourish. While some types of turfgrass are more drought tolerant than others, a study done in San Antonio in 2006/2007 shows there is more to it than just the variety of grass.

Four species of turfgrass were planted on test plots – bermuda, St. Augustine, zoysia and buffalo. One set was planted on soil with an unrestricted depth and one set was planted on soil restricted to four inches deep. The grass was allowed to become established and then was forced in to a 60 day drought (a moving shed was built cover the grass when it rained). The full report can be found at http://itc.tamu.edu/ but in short - all of the varieties with deep root systems, planted in unrestricted soil, survived the drought (even St. Augustine) and none of the varieties survived with shallow root systems in four inch soil (even buffalo).

So while some varieties handle drought better than others, soil preparation and proper management to promote deep roots have as much or more to do with a healthy lawn in west Texas than the type of grass. That's not to say that a lawn will stay green and healthy during an extended drought, in the study many grasses turned brown and went dormant; after the 60-day drought they were given a recovery period - they received water and had a chance to green back up. But if we can train our lawns to have deep root systems, they can recover much better after the rough periods instead of having to be replaced.

To help turf to have deep roots, good soil preparation when planting is the first step. Heavy, compacted soils need to be loosened up and improved with organic matter. For existing lawns, an aerator might be helpful in opening up compacted soil.

Then proper irrigation will have a major impact on how deep roots can grow. Light, frequent watering will promote shallow roots, while deep watering only when needed will allow deeper roots to grow. One simple trick to find out when grass needs water is to stick a screwdriver into the soil. Dry soil is hard, but soil that still has some moisture will allow the screwdriver to slide in easily.

Mowing height and frequency also have a big impact on how good a lawn looks. Follow the 1/3 rule and never cut off more than 1/3 of the grass at once. Don't let it get really tall in between mowing! Mowing improperly too often causes significant stress to the roots and creates a thin, unattractive lawn.

June To-Do's

- Continue to dead-head flowers
- Replenish mulch as needed
- Keep beds weeded to eliminate competition for water
- Watch for chinch bug & grub damage in lawns

Pecan Update

Keep an eye on the website:

http://pecan.ipmpipe.org/

for news and info on pecan pest management. Now that summer is here, irrigation is the most important maintenance factor. Be sure to thoroughly irrigate pecans is there isn't a good rainfall every 21 days.

Mosquitos

Gardeners know that the best time to be outside working in the yard or garden in the hot summer time is during the morning and evening when it's cooler. But unfortunately, this is the time that mosquitoes like to come out too. Now that mosquitoes are known to transmit harmful diseases, it's more important than ever to keep them under control.

A good mosquito repellent is needed to keep these pesky insects away. Deet is the most common active ingredient, but now days there are other options too.

The EPA has put together a helpful website that has an insect repellent database. Go to citybugs.tamu.edu, and search "Help selecting mosquito repellents" to get the link.

You can get a list of all available products, or enter in how long you need it to work, or if you're looking for a specific active ingredient. It will give you a list of all the currently registered products.

It's also important to not have any stagnant, standing water in the yard. Ditches or other low spots are breeding grounds for mosquitoes. If possible, try to improve drainage so they dry out faster. If you have a rain barrel to catch and store rainwater for landscape use, it needs to have a screen or filter over it to keep the mosquitoes out.

You can also use a product called a mosquito dunk, which is a biological pesticide. It contains a bacteria called Bt that is only toxic to mosquitoes. You can put it in water features and rain barrels and it won't hurt plants, pets, or other insects.

Another very helpful website is mosquitosafari.tamu.edu. It has info on different types of mosquitoes, and all the different methods of controlling them. It covers repellents, spraying, fogging, misting and even special vacuums.

Plant Spotlight

Jerusalem Sage

Phlomis fruticosa

Beautiful perennial that is drought and heat tolerant, and has really interesting flowers. Grows to about 3 feet tall and wide,.

Soil Solarization for Garden Pest Control

Weeds and diseases are a huge pain for gardeners, especially in vegetable garden settings where most chemicals can't be used. One option you might consider is called soil solarization. Soil solarization is a method used to kill weed seeds and will also kill plant disease organisms.

Basically, all it is – is covering an area of soil with clear plastic to trap the sun's heat, which heats the soil enough to kill pests.

You can use soil sterilization in many landscape areas, but 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. This summer is a good opportunity to do this, once spring crops are finished.

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.

Pollinators in the Garden

To be healthy and successful, a landscape or garden should be full of all kinds of life, not just plants. There need to be microorganisms in the soil, earthworms, insects and other things to reach full potential. While there are lots of pest insects, there are also some that we can't do without such as pollinators. Did you know that 1/3 of the food we eat comes from insect pollinated plants?

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.

To help increase pollinators in the garden and improve fruit set of tomatoes, squash and other plants, try doing a few things to help them. First, design your garden so that there is something blooming all the way from spring through fall. Next, incorporate some plants that are native to our area, and also some old fashioned plants. And don't get too upset if some of your plants get eaten, such as milk weed or parsley - these are a favorite food for monarch larvae.

Next, avoid pesticides as much as possible. If absolutely required, don't use broad spectrum ones. Use products that are selective and targeted to a specific pest and won't kill everything in the yard.

Finally, provide a source of water for pollinators to drink out of. Butterflies like a shallow saucer buried to the rim in a sunny spot, filled with pine bark or stones and water.

St. Augustine Lawn Struggles

St. Augustine lawns have been having a rough time the last few years. They are stressed by environmental factors such as cold winters and drought like we often experience. And while St. Augustine is the most shade tolerant warm season grass we have, it still can't grow in deep shade and bare spots will show up under shade trees.

If your St. Augustine is not thriving under a large shade tree, consider replacing it with a groundcover such as monkey grass or asian jasmine. The only other option would be to thin the canopy of the tree to let some more filtered light through. Increasing the mowing height and cutting the grass a little higher can help it survive low light conditions as well.

Another issue that has been seen in the Concho Valley this spring is the disease Take-All Root Rot. It is a fungal disease, and symptoms include large patches of yellowing which later die back and can be easily pulled out of the ground. The chemical fungicide thiophenate-methyl (trade name Cleary's 3336g) can help control it, but I would also suggest applying spaghnum peat moss. The disease needs alkaline conditions, and peat moss is acidic. Also, avoid over-fertilizing as high rates of nitrogen fertilizer can contribute to the disease.

Other common pests of the lawn this time of year is the grub worm and chinch bugs. The most damaging grubs to the lawn are the larva of the brown June Beetle, and they feed on the roots of grass. If you have brown patches, try digging in at the edge of a dead patch - if you can pull up the grass like a carpet, and/or you see the white grubs, apply some grub control pesticides such as carbaryl.

A more common insect pest is the chinch bug, which thrives in hot dry weather. Try pouring a jug of soapy water near a brown spot, wait up to 20 minutes,; if it's chinch bug damage, they will begin to emerge out of the ground.

For more info on chinch bugs, visit https://insects.tamu.edu/extension/publications/epubs/e-420.cfm

Classes & Programs

June 2015

Saturday, June 6, 9:00am
Saturday Seminar - Using Texas Natives As Accents in the Landscape
Instructor - Steve Lewis, Owner, Native Ornamentals in Mertzon
Location: San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts, 1 Love Street
Cost: $10
From the People/Plant Connection. A "Talk and Tour" session, a one hour lesson will be given by Steve Lewsis. Then we'll caravan to the nursery for a tour. To pre-register, call 656-3104.

Tuesday, June 16, 6pm
Backyard Basics Seminar Series - Aquaponics
You don't have to live in the country to grow your own fresh fruit! Join us for a new
series of classes on urban production. See attached flyer for details .

Friday, June 19, 12:00pm
Lunch N Learn Class - Rainwater Harvesting and Water Conservation
Instructor - Allison Watkins
Location: Tom Green County Commissioner's Courtroom
Judge Edd B. Keyes Bldg, 113 W Beauregard
Cost: $5
No matter what the weather is doing, we always need to conserve water! Learn how to capture and store rainwater when we get it, so you can use it when we don't.

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