

Concho Valley Horticulture Update

July 2018

Making Landscape Work Easier

Everyone would like to have a beautiful, healthy landscape and lawn but that can be a challenge in west Texas, and some homeowners feel stuck – thinking they can't have a nice yard without putting in tons of work and wasting a lot of water. But believe it or not, it can be done – it just takes knowledge and planning. There are many tools, resources and practices to implement to create an attractive yard that doesn't use too much water or require excessive labor. And it's worth the initial effort to research and learn how, because a thick lawn and well placed trees and shrubs make a very enjoyable place to spend time outside.

Visit the website <http://earthkind.tamu.edu/> for helpful publications on topics ranging from composting and soil improvement, to drip irrigation, rainwater harvesting, landscape design and more. The first step to a low-maintenance landscape is soil improvement with compost; incorporating organic matter into the soil before planting can make a significant difference in the success of growing plants and will reduce the need for irrigation and fertilizer. Another major step is plant selection. Choose plants that are native or well-adapted to the local conditions and that can handle our soil, water, climate, etc. It's not as simple as choosing something with the right zone number. The zones listed on plant labels are only an indication of cold hardiness – so yes it should match our zone (8a) but that is not the only factor to consider. The high pH of our soil limits selection and is the reason we can't grow blueberries and azaleas. Also, a plant may be within the cold hardiness zone, but not be able to handle the extreme heat of summer.



One useful resource for plant selection is the Texas SuperStar program. Visit <http://texassuperstar.com> to see a list of plants that have been through lots of testing and have been proven tough. The most recent SuperStar designation is the Mystic Spires Improved Blue Salvia, announced in April. It is an improved form of another salvia, but the new Mystic Spires is more compact, flowers more through the growing season, and is a great foundation for a perennial bed.

July To-Do's

- Check melons and squash (frequently!) for ripeness
- Audit irrigation system to check for problems
- Pick okra, peas and peppers often to maintain production.
- Watch for summer pests like chinch bugs and spider mites

Pecan Update



Keep an eye out for second generation pecan nut casebearers—no treatment is likely needed for heavy crops, but light crops may need treatment.

Visit pecankernel.tamu.edu for more info.

Saving Seeds

The most reliable way to start plants from seed and know exactly what you're getting is to buy seeds from a trustworthy source each year, but there is also value in knowing how to harvest and store your own seeds from vegetables and flowers. It's especially beneficial when growing certain types of heirloom vegetables and old fashioned plants.

When it comes to vegetables, don't try saving seeds from hybrid varieties. Hybrid seeds can be very expensive and have desirable properties, so it can be tempting – but the next generation (plants grown from seed saved from fruit of the first generation) will not be true to type and will likely be very different than the first year's crop. But seeds from varieties that are considered 'true to type' can be harvested and retain the same flavor, color, size, etc. from year to year.

But also be careful of cross-pollination; vegetables like cucurbits (squashes, melons, cucumbers, etc), peppers, carrots and corn readily cross pollinate so if there are multiple varieties in the same garden or vicinity, there will be some genetic variability. It's best to physically separate from other plants or grow one variety at a time if reliable seed collection is important. Crops like peas, tomatoes (if not planted ad-

jacent to each other), and most beans do not readily cross pollinate.

To save vegetable seed, allow the fruit to fully ripen and mature and then harvest the seed – allow to dry thoroughly before storing in a cool, dry location. For a more detailed guide on how to save seeds for specific crops, visit

<https://tomgreen.agrilife.org/horticulture/>.

For example – tomato seeds should be squeezed out with the pulp into a non-metal container, like a glass jar. Let it set for two days and the pulp will ferment, which allows the seeds to be washed clean when sprayed with water. Clean, viable seeds drop to the bottom. Lay the seeds out to dry well, then store. There is also a helpful publication on how to harvest and store wildflower seeds from the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center at the same link.



Plant Spotlight

Basket of Fire pepper
Capsicum annuum

This pepper has both ornamental and edible pepper characteristics and was recently designated as a Texas Superstar plant by Texas A&M University. It is especially nice used in hanging baskets, does best in full sun and needs well drained soil.



Watering in Drought

It has been hot and dry, and in the city limits we are closer to stricter water restrictions. We all need to be even more careful in our landscape care and use correct watering techniques. But don't worry, most landscapes can survive on once-a-week irrigation. If lawns or beds have been irrigated too frequently (which would be more than twice a week) they will struggle to adapt to stricter new watering rules, but yards that have been properly watered should have no major issues adjusting.

Actually, once per week is the recommended frequency for lawn irrigation regardless of water restrictions—and that guideline comes from scientific research. Applying an inch of water one day a week will allow deep, healthy roots to develop. Yards that have been receiving lighter, more frequent irrigation may have shallow root systems and could be less drought tolerant.

The key to helping landscapes survive the drought and make it through water restrictions is deep watering. Irrigate slowly and thoroughly, so that the water soaks deep into the ground. If shallow, heavy soils or slopes cause water to begin to run-off before the ground has been thoroughly soaked, use the 'soak and cycle' method. This just means to run the system until the water starts puddling or running off and stop. Wait a period of time to let the water sink in, and run it again.

We may need to water a little longer than usual and get the water as deep as possible to combat the high temperatures and dry winds. Finally, water early in the morning before temperatures heat up and cause water loss to evaporation.

There is a terrific opportunity coming up to learn how to save money and water while still having a successful yard. Join us Saturday, June 30th from 9am to 12pm at the Tom Green 4-H building (3168 N. US Highway 67, San Angelo) for a free program hosted by the Concho Valley Master Gardeners on rainwater harvesting and landscape irrigation featuring guest speaker Dr. Dotty Woodson. Please call to RSVP: 325-659-6522.

Visit <https://tomgreen.agrilife.org/> for more info and to see the flyer.

Trouble with Tomatoes

Tomatoes are the most popular homegrown vegetable because they are easy to use in meals and are fun to grow. But the hot summer weather can be stressful for tomato plants, and some gardeners have a hard time getting a good harvest.

One problem is low fruit set. The most common and likely culprit for having a tomato plant with lots of flowers but not very much fruit resulting from those flowers is heat. Tomato flowers get fertilized and set fruit better when it's not so blazing hot. They do best when temperatures are below 70 degrees at night and under 95 degrees during the day.

Well, we can't change the weather, so the best thing we can do is select the best varieties that can take the heat. Some varieties can set fruit better at high temperatures than others

Some examples are varieties like Heatwave, Sunmaster, Solar Fire and Celebrity. Cherry tomatoes also produce better in hot temperatures. Large heirloom tomatoes are the ones that will have the hardest time making fruit in the summer. If you are having trouble with your tomato plants now, consider switching varieties next year.

Another common tomato problem is a spider mite infestation. Spider mites thrive in the dry heat, so our summers are perfect for them. Keep a close eye out for them, they live underneath the leaves so they can be hard to spot.

At the very first sign of spider mites on tomato plants, spray the undersides of the leaves with a stream of water to try and knock them off. Also try an insecticidal soap, or a horticultural oil.

A third common tomato problem is curled or distorted leaves. This is usually caused by temperature fluctuations, and does not hurt the plant. Another cause could be a virus or herbicide damage, as tomatoes are very sensitive to 2,4-d herbicide.

Unfortunately, there are plenty of other things that can inhibit tomato production, for a good resource to help narrow it down visit the Tomato Problem Solver from Texas A&M at <https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/vegetable/problem-solvers/tomato-problem-solver/>

Summer Insect Pests

It's hard to think about doing any landscaping and gardening when it's so hot! The summer is the harshest season for most of our plants so the focus this time of year is survival – mainly watering (efficiently!) and pest control. It's not a great time of year for planting, so if possible wait a few more months – fall is an excellent time of year to plant trees, shrubs and many other ornamentals.

So to keep the landscape and garden as healthy as possible, keep an eye out for insect pests that might cause damage and stress. Some common summer yard pests include lace bugs, grasshoppers, fire ants, spider mites and squash bugs.

Lace bugs are tiny insects –but can cause a lot of aesthetic damage to landscape plants such as lantana. They generally don't kill the plant, but cause stippling on the leaves (a sand blasted look) making the plant lose its ornamental value. Applying an insecticide will not reverse the damage to the leaves, so it's best to just prune the plant back heavily to allow healthy new growth. If the lace bugs are a persistent problem, try raking away mulch and cleaning up plant debris in the bed in the winter time, to remove overwintering material. Lady beetles are a good predator, and can sometimes be purchased at local nurseries. If a pesticide is needed, try a contact insecticide such as insecticidal soap or neem oil, and avoid systemic insecticides such as imidacloprid as those can affect butterflies and other beneficials that visit the flowers.

Be especially conscientious about applying any insect control around edible crops, even organic products. Anything that is harmful to insects can be harmful to people, so check the label and only use products that are labeled as safe for a vegetable garden and follow all instructions.

While they aren't plant pests, gardeners can also be plagued by fire ants, mosquitos and ticks. The best way to prevent ticks is to keep the yard trimmed and tidy. For mosquitos, be sure to not have any standing water – even very small amounts. For help controlling fire ants, visit <http://fireant.tamu.edu/>.

Get Started for Fall Gardening

Believe it or not, fall vegetable gardening starts in July. Late summer is the time to plant warm season crops for fall harvest, such as tomatoes and squash; and it's time to make plans and start prepping for cool season crops, which will be planted later.

If you can find good transplants in the nursery or garden center (they're not always easy to find in the summer), they are preferable over seeds for fall gardening because you will get the crop sooner and be certain to harvest before the first frost.

It can be tough to establish transplants in the garden in July and August, but as long as they are adequately watered they should be fine. During the first two weeks, water lightly every day. Don't allow the plants to dry out, but don't keep the soil completely saturated or it will rot the roots. If the summer heat is just too much for the small transplants, shade them in the afternoon.

After they are established, start fertilizing. Get as much healthy growth as possible to ensure a large harvest in the fall.

Some later fall vegetable options would be snap beans, beets, broccoli, brussel sprouts, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, swiss chard, and collards. These should all be planted around September to October. Leafy greens such as spinach and lettuce can be planted any time during the cool season, from October to March. It's good to stagger the planting of these plants every 2 weeks, so that there is always something to harvest.

It is surprising to some people that fall gardening can be so successful, and that you can grow almost all the same plants as a spring garden. A fall garden does not just have to be cabbage and broccoli only; tomatoes, squash, and many of the favorite spring gardening crops can be done grown very well.

Speaking of fall gardening, the Concho Valley Master Gardeners are hosting their 7th annual Fall Landscaping Symposium in September, and registration is now open! Visit <https://txmg.org/conchovalley/> for more info and to sign up, pre-registration is required to attend.

Upcoming Events

July 2018

Saturday, June 30, 9:00am-12:00pm

Water Conservation Seminar—Every Drop Counts

Location: Tom Green 4-H Center, 3168 N. US Highway 67

Cost: Free to attend!

Speaker: Dr. Dotty Woodson, Extension Water Resources Specialist

Hosted by the Concho Valley Master Gardeners; Learn how to save money on the water bill! Topics include rainwater harvesting and irrigation efficiency. See attached flyer for more info. **Call to RSVP: 325-659-6522**

Thursday, July 5, 2:00pm-5:00pm

Gardening Seminar—Fall Vegetable Gardening

NEW Location: People/Plant Connection Headquarters -Butterfield Bldg, 224 W. Beauregard
Second green door, going downstairs—look for the PPC banner

Cost: \$25

Speaker: Allison Watkins

Hosted by the People/Plant Connection; Think it's too early for fall gardening? Think again! July is the time of year to start warm season fall crops, and prepare for cool season crops to be planted later. Get a head start on a productive fall garden, join us to learn more! **Call to register: 325-656-3104**

Friday, July 20, 12:00pm

Lunch N Learn Class - Diagnosing and Managing Plant Problems

NEW Location: People/Plant Connection Headquarters
Butterfield Building, 224 W. Beauregard

Second green door, going downstairs—look for the PPC banner

Cost: \$5

Speaker: Allison Watkins

Hosted by the People/Plant Connection; Plant pests got you down? Join us to learn about how to correctly identify plant problems.

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



Allison Watkins

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