

# Urban Dirt

Gardening Events and Information for Texans

## Reading the Fine Print

Article and photos by Terri Simon, Master Gardener

The brilliant red powder resembles paprika, but appearances can be deceiving. I spotted the photo in the February 2017 National Geographic magazine. Used in a variety of items including cosmetics, imitation crab meat, soups and dairy-based products, the powder is commonly used in many food items that have a red color. It is derived from crushed cochineal scale insects. The bugs infest prickly pear cactus. Females



Photo courtesy of nationalgeographic.com



Photo courtesy of Garden.LoveToKnow.com

eat the red prickly pears on the cactus and if squished, a red liquid squirts out. The cochineal insect is a native of Mexico, Central and South America. There they are harvested by traditional or controlled methods.

Using traditional methods, the insects are harvested by hand from infected prickly pear cactus. If a controlled method is used small baskets called Zapotec nests hold female insects which are collected and processed. One pound of red cochineal dye takes 70,000 cochineal insects. Peru makes 200 tons of dye a year.



Photo courtesy of StitchAndYarn.com

Cochineal dye goes by a variety of names: carmine, red dye #4, crimson lake, natural red, C.I.

75470, E120, “natural coloring” and cochineal extract. The cochineal bug is usually less than 1/4 inch long with the scientific name of

*Dasylopius coccus*. The Aztecs and Incas used the insects as a dye. After the Spaniards took the dye back to Spain, it soon became the second most prized export from Mexico after silver. The Catholic cardinals’ cloaks and the British army “redcoats” were colored with cochineal dye.

If you are squeamish about the thought of eating crushed bugs, read the food product labels closely. Several products with strawberries or strawberry colors may contain the dye. You could always add your own washed strawberries or other red fruits or vegetables to products. Be aware though, that every day you eat insects and rodent filth, mammalian excreta and mold in food products. The FDA regulations allow a small percentage of these contaminants in common foods. For a list of the allowed food contaminants, visit the FDA website <https://www.fda.gov/Food/GuidanceRegulation/GuidanceDocumentsRegulatoryInformation/SanitationTransportation/ucm056174.htm>.

By the way, one thing I learned while roaming the aisles reading the labels on products, the most commonly used dye was red dye #40.

It is a highly refined dye derived from petrochemical products. That limits your red dye choices. You can choose a “natural” insect derived dye, or a petrochemical derivative. The bottom line is: learn to read the fine print.



Photo by Terri Simon

\*\* To view a video about cochineal bugs from the North Carolina Museum of Natural Science, visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9YzMIEdb6mo>

## Upcoming Events

### April 2017

#### **Green Thumb Gardening Series: *Plant advice and tips from the Master Gardeners***

##### ***Herbs: Growing and Using***

**Apr. 15**, Maude Smith Marks Library, 10:00 - noon.

**Apr. 18**, Spring Branch Memorial Library, 6:30 - 8:30 p.m.

**Apr. 20**, Freeman Branch Library, 6:30 - 8:30 p.m.

**Apr. 27**, Barbara Bush Library, 6:30 - 8:30 p.m.

##### **Plant Sale**

**Apr. 22**, Spring Sale and Symposium: Landscape plants and perennials suited to our region. 8 a.m.-Symposia, Sale-9 a.m. - 1 p.m. Bear Creek Extension, 3303 Bear Creek Drive, Houston, 77084

##### **Educational Program**

**Apr. 13**, 10:00 - 11:30 a.m., *How to Take Care of Your Hand Tools* by Louis Mickler, Harris County Master Gardener. Genoa Friendship Garden Education Building, 1202 Genoa Red Bluff Rd, Houston 77045

**Apr. 20**, 6:30- 8:00 p.m., Gulf Coast Fruit Study Group presents: *Stone Fruit* by Herman Auer, Texas Master Gardener. Bear Creek Extension, 3303 Bear Creek Drive, Houston, 77084

##### **Open Garden Day: *Meet the Master Gardeners!***

**Apr. 17**, 8:30 -11a.m., Genoa Friendship Garden, 1202 Genoa Red Bluff Rd., Pasadena, TX

**Apr. 25**, Workshops & children's activities, *Herbs: Growing and Using* 10:00 - 10:45 a.m. Bear Creek Gardens/Extension, 3303 Bear Creek Drive, Houston, 77084

### May 2017

#### **Green Thumb Gardening Series**

##### ***Insects in the Garden***

**May 12**, Barbara Bush Library, 6:30 - 8:30 p.m.

**May 16**, Spring Branch Memorial Library, 6:30 - 8:30 p.m.

**May 18**, Freeman Branch Library, 6:30 - 8:30 p.m.

**May 20**, Maude Smith Marks Library, 10:00 - noon

##### **Open Garden Day: *Meet the Master Gardeners!***

**May 15**, 8:30-11:00 a.m., Genoa Friendship Garden, 1202 Genoa Red Bluff Rd., Pasadena, TX

**May 23**, Workshops & children's activities, *Insects in the Garden*, 10:00-11:00 a.m. Bear Creek Gardens/Extension, 3303 Bear Creek Drive, Houston, 77084

## Have Garden Questions?

Master Gardener Help Line - (281) 855-5600

9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m., Mon.-Fri.

Email your questions to: [phonehcmga@gmail.com](mailto:phonehcmga@gmail.com)

Or, drop in or mail us: 3033 Bear Creek Dr., Houston, TX 77084

# Plant Sales

**8:00- 8:45 AM**  
A synopsis of what the HCMGA has available at the sale will be presented.

Open to the public with featured speakers

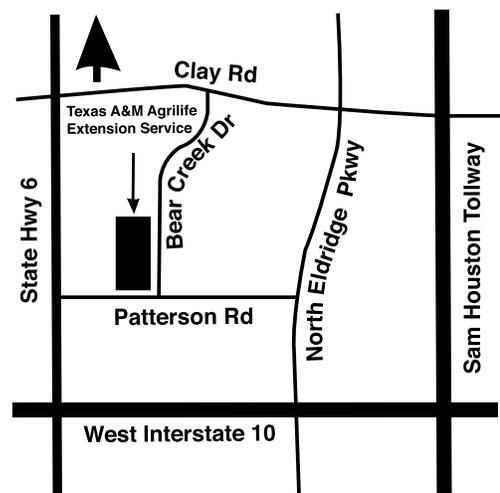
**9:00 AM Sale Gates Open**

Harris County Master Gardeners Association  
**2017 SPRING PERENNIAL SALE**  
Saturday April 22<sup>th</sup>, 2017  
9:00 AM to 1:00 PM

3303 Bear Creek Drive, Houston, 77084

Open to the public with speaker to present available plants at 8 am. Sale gates open at 9 am. Wagons provided, but bring your own if possible. Come early as we sell out quickly.

*All proceeds go to supporting the Harris County Master Gardeners, a non profit organization.*



# Herb of the Month - Pineapple Sage (*Salvia elegans*)

Article by Karen McGowan, Master Gardener

We here in south Texas have a relatively hospitable environment for this month's herb, since Pineapple Sage is a perennial shrub native right next door, to Mexico and Guatemala. A member of the salvia family, pineapple sage boasts tubular red flowers and puts out the welcome mat for both butterflies and hummingbirds! Planted after danger of frost has passed, pineapple sage lends a waft of its namesake fruit to garden paths, while adding a pop of bright color to the landscape. The *Salvia* genus gains its name from the Latin verb "salvare," which means "to save." According to the website "Livestrong," "(m)any ancient cultures, including the Greeks and Romans, used various kinds of sage medicinally to treat health problems, including indigestion and heartburn. Culinary use was a secondary purpose for cultivating sages. A 2009 Irish university study, however, shows that common sage may aid digestion of meat products. Various kinds of salvia are still used today in alternative medicines such as teas." If you happen to subscribe to the Ayurvedic approach that digestion is the "seat of good health," this information about salvia is important news!

Unlike other sages, you won't find pineapple sage in your local market. But no worries, this is an exceptionally easy and beautiful herb to grow in your garden! Expect a height of three to four feet tall or more at pineapple sage's maturity; so aesthetically, this herb would make an excellent backdrop to taller annuals, such as Rocket Snapdragons. Pineapple sage performs best in sun and in well-drained soil that is both moist and nutrient-rich, in order to support its rapid growth and prolific flowering. Pineapple sage is propagated easily from cuttings, or can also be purchased as a 4-inch or quart plant. In either case, situate new plants in beds about 36 inches apart, and prepare for a full shrubby plant by watering regularly during the initial two weeks after planting, then afterward only during drought periods. Here in south Texas when the temperatures reach the 90s and low 100s in mid to late summer, if pineapple sage is placed in a southern or western exposure you may note some drooping in the afternoon. In these instances, a bit of extra watering will be called for. Pineapple sage is an herb also fairly vigorous in containers when planted in a large one

#### Citations:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salvia\\_elegans](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salvia_elegans)

<https://bonnieplants.com/growing/growing-pineapple-sage/>

<http://theherbgardener.blogspot.com/2010/06/how-to-grow-pineapple-sage.html>



Photo by Pat Kelly



Photo courtesy of agrilife.org

– at minimum, a 12-inch pot. Should you decide to add pineapple sage your patio's container garden, in the most severe heat of summer, plan to move the plant into a partially shaded area on the patio; however, do not move indoors, as this will cause pineapple sage to stress and decline.

Once established in a favorable locale, this hardy herb planted in the ground can tolerate a heavy frost down to 20 degrees (if planted in pots, pineapple sage will need to be moved indoors during freezing temperatures). To promote lush growth and vigor in the spring, cut pineapple sage down to a few inches above ground after the blooming period ends in late fall or early winter. Contingent upon the weather pattern, starting in Zone 9 pineapple sage may not go dormant. Nevertheless, prune pineapple sage down to the ground after the fall blooming period ends.

Pineapple sage's green leaves can be muddled for a refreshing drink, and its red blooms can be chopped and added to any variety of dishes, including salads and desserts. A really beautiful use of its red leaves is to add to baked pastries and cakes, such as buttery pound cake. My chef's recommendation this month is to peruse your pastry dessert recipe file and select one that is an "oldie but goodie" that could use a little jazzing up. Chop up those beautiful flowers from pineapple sage and add them in prior to cooking, and remember to finish with a flourish of fresh pineapple sage as a garnish! Happy gardening and cooking, folks!

<http://homeguides.sfgate.com/care-salvia-elegans-30827.html>

<http://www.livestrong.com/article/411239-uses-for-pineapple-sage/>

# Plant of the Month - Indian Blanket, Blanket Flower, Firewheel, Girasol rojo (Red sunflower), and others (*Gaillardia*)

Article by Beth Braun, Master Gardener

Asteraceae (Aster Family)

USDA Native Status: L48 (N), AK (I), HI (I), CAN (I), PB (I)

My mind played a strange word trick when I started researching the Blanket Flower by its botanical name—*Gaillardia*. It went to *Giardia*, a microscopic parasite that's one of the most common causes of waterborne disease in the U.S. It causes . . . well, we won't go into that here. Thankfully, *Gaillardia* in its many forms bring us only good cheer.

I wonder if any of you remember hearing a speaker—perhaps its owner—from a noted plant nursery in Raleigh, North Carolina present his amazing collection of plants.



I've forgotten every detail except the t-shirt for sale with the slogan "Friends don't let friends buy annuals". That made an impression on me, and may account for my move toward perennials.

While some species of *Gaillardia* are considered annuals, many are perennials. In fact, it was among the first to bloom this spring in a butterfly garden I tend, not long after the two nights of below-freezing temperatures. The Meyer lemons, *Salvia greggii*, Milkweed, *Tecoma stans* (Yellow Bells) and verbena 'Homestead purple' are the main draws in this garden, but pollinators are also attracted to *Gaillardia*, which goes by numerous common names.

Some writers speculate that "Indian Blanket" and "Blanket Flower" refer to the bright colors of the flower reminiscent of blankets woven by Native Americans. Others suggest that the name comes from its capacity to reseed itself and 'blanket' an area in favorable conditions.

The USDA's plants database shows *Gaillardia* as Native and/or Introduced in the Lower 48, Canada, Alaska, Hawaii, and Pacific



Basin. If you're curious to see it in its manifestations from white to yellow, gold, orange, lavender, maroon, coral to bi-color, you can go to the plant search area of Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center's website, [www.wildflower.org](http://www.wildflower.org). Texas Highways magazine included Indian Blanket in its 30 most common Texas native flowers to identify and celebrate, and Sunset magazine included it in its 20 favorite perennial flowers. Texas wildflower enthusiasts are reporting sightings in forums including Facebook's Texas Wildflower Report. Seed companies tout the Blanket Flower as one of the easiest perennials to grow due to their tolerance of heat and dry conditions, and offer various cultivars. A member of the Aster family, *Gaillardia* is named after an 18th century French magistrate, M. Gaillard de Charentonneau, who was a patron of botany. Vintage botanical prints illustrate a variety of charming *Gaillardia* in its range of colors, patterns, and sizes.

As an interesting aside, *Gaillardia* is the name of a residence hall at Texas State University in San Marcos. Opened in 2013, it received a Gold LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification from the U.S. Green Building Council. The building is named for the school flower (who knew?), and Texas State's school colors of maroon and gold are inspired by this popular native flower.



Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service and the Harris County Master Gardeners invite you to join us for the educational and enjoyable:

## *Open Garden Days*

On the 4<sup>th</sup> Tuesday of every month from January, 2017 through October, 2017. The event is FREE. However, please register in the lobby when you arrive.

**We are located at: 3033 Bear Creek Drive, Houston, TX 77084**

**Email: [ogd.harrishort@gmail.com](mailto:ogd.harrishort@gmail.com) Phone: 281-855-5600**

**Like us on Facebook:**

**<https://www.facebook.com/HarrisCountyMasterGardeners/>**

**From 9:00 to 11:30** you are welcome to wander around the grounds and to visit with the Master Gardeners as they work in the gardens.

**From 10:00 to 11:00** workshops and activities adapted for all ages are held.

*Workshop for adults and older teens* will include a hands-on gardening experience related to the Green Thumb Lecture topics listed below.

*Activities for 7 year olds to younger teens* will include hands-on gardening and/or a project with a nature theme. A parent or responsible adult must be on the premises, and is welcome to attend the adult workshop.

*Pre-school to 6 year olds* and their parents can share a hands-on gardening and / or a nature theme craft activity.

**If you wish to participate in the workshop / activity session from 10:00 to 11:00 AM, please RSVP to the email or telephone number above by the Sunday before the event, and include the ages of children attending with you. We want to have enough supplies for everyone.**

Monthly 2017 Green Thumb topics and the Open Garden Day dates:

January 24 – Soils and Compost  
February 28 – Spring Vegetable Gardening  
March 28 – Roses: Planting, Growing & Upkeep  
April 25 – Herbs  
May 23 – Insects in the Garden

June 27 – Propagation and Seed Saving  
July 25 – Raised Beds, Drip Irrigation & Rain Barrels  
August 22 – Fall Vegetables  
Sept. 26 – Gardening with Children and Grandchildren  
Oct. 24 – Trees: Planting and Care (includes fruit trees)

# Trial Update and Current Trends

Article by Ruthann Pechulis, Intern

At the March P2 lecture, Harris County Extension Agent Paul Winski presented photos and information about *Current Trends and Plant Trials* gleaned from the California Spring Trials of 2016. The color photos were outstanding!

Get ready for some beautiful, hardy and stunning additions for our gardens that should be available at retail stores this spring and summer. Flowering plants, herbs and succulents were highlighted. Succulents are not just for ground cover anymore! They were shown



*Queen of Hearts*

as wall hangings, in picture frames and covering walls. Some real show stoppers to watch out for are: petunia Night Sky and Queen of Hearts; penta Glitterati; and angelonia Archangel. And there were the white strawberries Bubble Berry and Hula



*Night Sky*

Photo courtesy of agrilife.org

Berry with bubble gum and pineapple flavors!

Photos of past flooding and

current recovery showed the Bear Creek trial beds are up and growing again.

The Earth Kind Azalea

Trial beds at Bear Creek were also replanted

because of the flooding. This is the third year for the Earth Kind rose trial beds at M D Anderson. Photos showed there are 20 rose varieties under cultivation in these beds. Master Gardeners are hard at work caring for these roses and keeping records of their progress. There are several showing great promise of becoming "Earth Kind" roses: Beverly Rose, Plum Perfect and Gay Hammond. There were also photos of the 2016 Earth Kind trial beds in Conroe that were completed at Nature's Way Resources where the roses are being monitored for disease resistance and growth habits.



*penta Glitterati*

Photo courtesy of agrilife.org

Not a Master Gardener?  
Get Master Gardener Event Notifications  
Sign up for email alerts for upcoming  
Master Gardener events open to the public.



**Stone Fruit Talk**

"If it has a seed inside, it's a stone fruit"

**How to Grow Stone Fruit**

Open and Free to the public

How to plant, prune, and care for the best varieties of Stone Fruit

**Gulf Coast Fruit Tree Study Group**

April 20, 2017 Presentation  
6:30-8:00

With Noted Speaker Herman Auer



Place:  
3033 Bear Creek Drive  
Houston, TX 77084  
<http://harris-tx.tamu.edu/hort>



The Gulf Coast Fruit Study Group is proud to present "STONE FRUIT," April 20, 2017. The public is invited to learn about Stone Fruit production and care during this informative presentation, featuring speaker Herman Auer. Many varieties of stone fruit grow well in Harris County, making them an excellent addition to home orchards in the area. The program begins at 6:30 p.m. in the auditorium of the Harris County Texas AgriLife Extension Service Center, located at 3033 Bear Creek Drive.

Herman Auer is a Class of 1983 Texas Master Gardener from Santa Fe, Texas. His gardening expertise is on the production of peach and plum trees. Herman serves as a resource educator for the Galveston County Master

Gardeners, offering information on fruit tree production. He also teaches classes on fruit tree production at a local college.

This is the second quarterly meeting of the year for the Gulf Coast Fruit Study Group. There is no charge to attend, and the event is open to the public. For additional information, contact Ute Schaefer at 281.855.5600 or [Ute.Schaefer@ag.tamu.edu](mailto:Ute.Schaefer@ag.tamu.edu).

The Gulf Coast Fruit Study Group, first organized in 1987 to promote interest in fruit crops for the South Texas area, presents quarterly programs at Bear Creek, featuring lecturers with special knowledge of fruit crops.

# Gardening Tools

This chart is a handy guide for knowing the best times to plant in Harris County.

		<b>Vegetable Garden Planting Dates</b> for Harris County												<b>FACT SHEET</b>
		Marginal Planting Time  Ideal Planting Time 												Texas AgriLife Extension Service 3033 Bear Creek Dr, Houston, TX 77084 281.855.5600 • <a href="http://harris-tx.tamu.edu">http://harris-tx.tamu.edu</a>
	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC		
ASPARAGUS, Crowns														
BEANS, Lima & Snap Bush														
BEANS, Lima & Snap Pole														
BEETS														
BROCCOLI, Plants														
CABBAGE, Plants														
CAULIFLOWER, Plants														
CARROTS														
CHARD, Swiss														
CHINESE CABBAGE														
COLLARDS														
CORN														
CUCUMBER														
EGGPLANTS, Plants														
KOHLRABI, Plants														
LETTUCE														
MUSKMELON, Cantalope														
MUSTARD														
OKRA														
ONION, Bulb-type setes														
ONION, Transplant for scallions														
ONION, Multipliers														
PARSLEY														
PEAS, English & Snap														
PEAS, Southern														
PEPPER, Plants														
POTATO, Irish														
POTATO, Sweet														
PUMPKIN														
RADISH														
SPINACH														
SQUASH, Summer														
SQUASH, Winter														
TOMATO, Plants														
TURNIP														
WATERMELON														

# TEXAS A&M AGRI LIFE EXTENSION

TEXAS A&M AGRILIFE EXTENSION SERVICE  
3033 BEAR CREEK DR.  
HOUSTON, TX 77084

281.855.5600 FAX 281.855.5638

[harris.agrilife.org/program-areas/hort/](http://harris.agrilife.org/program-areas/hort/)

[hcmga.tamu.edu](http://hcmga.tamu.edu)

## Like Us On Facebook

The Harris County Master Gardeners as well as Texas A&M Agrilife Extension - Harris County Horticulture are actively participating on Facebook offering tips, lists, news and plant advice almost daily. The best part, instead of locating planting guides or insect documents, and sale dates for individuals, you can add the HCMG site



your account and easily share information with others. This is a definite timesaving device for these busy garden days and helps promote our organization.

[www.facebook.com/HarrisCountyMasterGardeners](http://www.facebook.com/HarrisCountyMasterGardeners)

[www.facebook.com/HarrisCountyHorticulture](http://www.facebook.com/HarrisCountyHorticulture)

URBAN DIRT • APRIL 2017



## April Green Thumb Gardening Series *Herbs: Growing and Using*

**April 15**

**Maude Smith Marks Library**  
10 a.m. - Noon

**April 20**

**Freeman Branch Library**  
6:30-8:30 p.m.

**April 18**

**Spring Branch Memorial Library**  
6:30-8:30 p.m.

**April 27**

**Barbara Bush Library**  
6:30-8:30 p.m.