

Urban Dirt

Water Conservation

Gardening Events and Information for Texans

Conserving Water

by Terri Simon, Master Gardener

As our natural resources begin to dwindle, water conservation will most likely become mandatory at some point. Even today during dry spells some areas have mandatory water rationing. There are steps you can take to conserve your water usage. Some are as simple as limiting the amount of time you spend in the shower, turning off the water while brushing your teeth, installing water efficient showerheads and placing a bucket in the shower while you bathe and using that water to water your plants. Repair leaky faucets and showerheads. Don't use your dish washer unless it has a full load. Cover your pool to inhibit water evaporation.

Other water conservation steps take more planning. Using water for your landscape may be considered a luxury by some. In Texas urban settings ¼ of the water is used to water our gardens and landscapes.

There are steps we can take to conserve the water usage in our yards. Here are just a few:

- Incorporate efficient water usage when planning your landscape. Study your yard. Conduct a soil analysis. How is the topography in your yard? Does your property have a slope? Are there low spots? Where are the microclimate areas? How much sun does your property get? What areas are exposed to winter wind? Consider all of these factors in your site analysis.
- It is estimated that lawns get double the water required. Plant drought tolerant grasses suitable for your area. Study the grass before watering. When grass is water stressed you will see discoloration and wilting. If you see this it means water within 24-48 hours or damage will occur. Water thoroughly but as infrequently as possible. Mow your grass to the proper height.

St. Augustine and buffalo grass need a height of three inches, centipede grass and Zoysia need two inches and Bermuda grass needs one inch. If your irrigation is on a timer it helps if you turn off the irrigation if rain is expected. Trees have a dripline that is below the outermost branches. Just inside and slightly beyond this dripline is the area you should fertilize and water. It is better to water deeply when needed.

- Practical lawn or turf areas should be limited. Square lawn areas are easier to maintain than long narrow sections. Remember that some areas may be located a good distance from a water source. Mulch your flower and shrub beds to reduce water evaporation. The ideal amount of mulch is 2-3 inches.

Mulch your trees as well but keep mulch away from the tree trunk. Avoid the mulch volcanoes you see around town. Do not use dyed or rubber mulch in your landscape.



Results of "volcano mulching" a tree

Photo courtesy psu.edu

- Consider xeriscape landscaping. Xeriscape landscaping is not limited to cacti and succulents. There are many attractive

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Upcoming Events

May 2019

Green Thumb Gardening Series

Water Conservation

May 9, Barbara Bush Library, 6:30 - 8:30 p.m.

May 16, Freeman Branch Library, 6:30 - 8:30 p.m.

May 18, Maude Smith Marks Library, 10:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.

May 21, Spring Branch Memorial Library, 6:30 - 8:30 p.m.

Open Garden Day

May 20, 8:30 - 11:00 a.m., Genoa Friendship Garden, 1202 Genoa Red Bluff Rd. *Plants for sale in the Greenhouse*

May 28, 10:00 - 11:15 a.m., Weekley Community Center - **Registration required by Sunday, May 26th to:**

ogd.harrishort@gmail.com. Weekley Community Center, 8440 Greenhouse Rd., Cypress, TX

Master Gardener Lecture Series

May 9, GFG Second Thursday 10:00 - 11:30 a.m. *Organics A to Z, The Healthiest Lawns and Gardens Ever!*

by Mike Searnt. Genoa Friendship Gardens Education Center building, 1202 Genoa Red Bluff Rd.

June 2019

Green Thumb Gardening Series

Propagation and Seed Saving

June 13, Barbara Bush Library, 6:30 - 8:30 p.m.

June 15, Maude Smith Marks Library, 10:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.

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

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

Open Garden Day

June 17, 8:30 - 11:00 a.m., Genoa Friendship Garden, 1202 Genoa Red Bluff Rd. *Plants for sale in the Greenhouse*

June 25, 10:00 - 11:15 a.m., Weekley Community Center **Registration required by Sunday, June 23rd to:**

ogd.harrishort@gmail.com. Weekley Community Center, 8440 Greenhouse Rd., Cypress, TX

Master Gardener Lecture Series

June 13, GFG Second Thursday 10:00 - 11:30 a.m. *Propagation: Stems & Leaves* by Jean Fefer, Harris County Master Gardener. Genoa Friendship Gardens Education Center building, 1202 Genoa Red Bluff Rd.

Have Garden Questions?

Email your questions and photos to: [phone hcmga@gmail.com](mailto:hcmga@gmail.com) or
Call us Monday – Friday 9:00 am to Noon at 713-274-0950

Herb of the Month - Echinacea (*Echinacea purpurea*)

by Karen McGowan, Master Gardener

In consideration of this month's focus on water conservation, let's consider a beautiful plant that is classified as native to Texas and drought-tolerant, Echinacea (*Echinacea purpurea*), also known as Purple Cornflower or Eastern Purple Cornflower. This is a beautiful plant that presents a beautiful addition to a prairie or wildflower garden, as well as in cut arrangements. There are nine known species of echinacea, all of which are native to North America.

By comparison with other medicinal herbs, the history of Echinacea is quite short. Originating in North America, Echinacea was utilized by indigenous Indians' traditional healers for a range of uses, including wounds, burns and insect bites to the chewing of roots for toothache and throat infections, and internal application for pain, coughs, stomach cramps and snake bites. European settlers' attention was drawn to the plant and subsequently the first Echinacea preparation, known as Meyers Blood Purifier, arrived on the market around 1880, with rheumatism, neuralgia and rattlesnake bites as indications for usage.



also resisting deer. Reaching a mature height range between one and three feet, the fibrous root system supports lanceolate, ovate leaves on this deciduous herb. Echinacea can be propagated rather easily by root cuttings. The plant self-seeds readily if at least some of the seed heads are left in place. Only occasional problems with Echinacea include Japanese beetle and leaf spot, and it is susceptible to Aster Yellows Disease.

While Echinacea remains one of the most heavily researched herbs, results regarding its effectiveness remain inconclusive. The general consensus is that the herb is potentially viable as a treatment of illness, not a preventative. Echinacea is used as a dietary supplement for the common cold and other infections, based on the idea that it might stimulate the immune system to more effectively fight infection. Echinacea preparations have been used topically for wounds and skin problems. The roots and above-ground parts of the echinacea plant are used fresh or dried to make teas, squeezed (expressed) juice, extracts, capsules and tablets, and preparations for external use. Several species of echinacea, most commonly *Echinacea purpurea* or *Echinacea angustifolia*, may be included in dietary supplements.

Medical uses aside, Echinacea is a hardy, water-wise plant that can be successfully incorporated into nearly any garden. May is a great time to make room for this lovely herb in yours!



Echinacea is perennial plant that prefers full sun, but will tolerate partial shade, and it attracts wildlife year-round in the form of bees, birds, and butterflies. Its water demands are very low, and Echinacea typically offers color three out of the four seasons; spring, summer, and fall. The hardy bloomer is drought, heat, and humidity-tolerant, and will adapt to poor soil, while

Citations:

<http://www.txsmartscape.com/plant-search/plant-details.php?id=322>

https://www.wildflower.org/plants/result.php?id_plant=ecpu

<http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/PlantFinder/PlantFinderDetails.aspx?kempercode=k180>

<https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/all/echinacea-purpurea/>

Plant of the Month - Vitex, Chaste Tree, Chasteberry, Abraham's balm, Lilac chastetree, Hemp Tree, Sage Tree, Indian Spice, or Monk's pepper (*Vitex agnus-castus*)

by Beth Braun, Master Gardener

VY-teks – Latin name for the grape genus¹

AG-nus KAS-tus – chaste lamb¹

The year 2011 is seared in my memory: our state was suffering through a drought that began in October 2010 and continued for several more years. Heat waves brought on by La Nina caused water in lakes, reservoirs and rivers to evaporate at a faster rate. Wells ran dry. The loss of life and property were enormous. The drought fueled wildfires, ruined crops, killed livestock, and put a real strain on the state's electric grid. The most devastating wildfire in state history was the Bastrop County Complex Fire, where over 34,000 acres were scorched and more than 1,300 homes destroyed.² During that hot summer a distraught woman called into the Harris County Master Gardener's phone room and asked, "How many gallons of water would it take to save the trees in Memorial Park?" I had no answer for her, but commiserated at the devastation we were witnessing. The combination of heat and drought eventually caused a 30% - 50% loss of tree canopy in sections of the park.

At the heart of our human experience of plants – whether gardening at the residential scale or stewardship of vast expanses – is hope for renewal. The drought losses just described launched ambitious new projects. The Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center was tapped by the Texas A&M Forest Service to sprout and replant 350,000 seedlings of loblolly pine originating from the Lost Pines region. You can read the inspiring account of this project at <https://www.wildflower.org/magazine/conservation/from-the-ashes>.

Meanwhile, the Memorial Park Conservancy mobilized a massive plan to remove non-native species and restore the park acreage to better resemble its historic environment. That Master Plan is described in <https://www.memorialparkconservancy.org/master-plan.html>.

On the heels of those drought years, Harris County experienced severe flooding three years in a row. Many of you lost your landscape plants and trees during the drought and/or floods. *How are we to manage such extremes as we plan our landscapes?*

Answering that question is beyond my expertise and the scope of this article. On the whole, though, I lean toward plants that can survive drought, reasoning that flood waters often recede within hours while droughts can go on for days and months, even years.

The Vitex is such a plant, and it anchors one end of the xeriscape garden at the Harris

County Master Gardeners' Genoa Friendship Garden.

Vitex is a fast-growing deciduous plant that can be maintained as a large shrub or small tree up to 15' in height. Its major attraction are the butterfly-attracting flower spikes reminiscent of lilacs grown in cooler climates. Varieties like 'Montrose Purple', 'LeCompte', or the pink 'Salinas Pink' have spikes as long as 8 to 12 inches.

Vitex earned a perfect 10 in Texas A&M's Earth Kind index for its high heat tolerance, low water use, low soil requirements,

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Vitex

Photo courtesy aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu

*Visit the Harris County Master Gardeners
Facebook page for event details!*

www.facebook.com/HarrisCountyMasterGardeners



Texas A&M AgriLife Extension

in partnership with

Hermann Park Conservancy

are pleased to present

**Master Gardeners in the City
at McGovern Centennial Gardens**

Saturday, May 11th & 25th

McGovern Centennial Gardens at Hermann Park

1500 Hermann Drive

Houston, Texas 77004

Events include garden tours and children activities.

These educational programs are FREE and OPEN TO THE PUBLIC.

Extension programs serve people of all ages regardless of socioeconomic level, race, color, sex, religion, disability or national origin.
The Texas A&M University System, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the County Commissioners Courts of Texas cooperating.

Ask a Master Gardener

Ask a Master Gardener is a volunteer program offered by Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. Volunteers staff booths and tables to provide free, research-based horticulture education to the public throughout Harris County.

In March we are going to be in the following locations!

- May 4** **Urban Harvest** - *1st Saturday*, 7:30 a.m.-12:00 p.m.
3401 Westheimer Rd. (corner of Buffalo Spdwy. & Westheimer), Houston
- Garden Oaks/Heights** - *1st Saturday*, 8:30 a.m. - 11 a.m. at The Farmstand,
938 Wakefield, Houston
- May 11** **Tomball** - *2nd Saturday*, 8:30 a.m. - 1 p.m. at 205 W. Main Street, Tomball, TX
- May 16** **Westchase** - *3rd Thursday*, 3-7 p.m. at 10503 Westheimer Rd., Houston
- May 19** **Town Lake** - *3rd Sunday*, 9:30 a.m. - 3 p.m. at 9955 Barker Cypress Rd.
Cypress, TX
- May 25** **Memorial Villages** - *4th Saturday*, 8:30 a.m. - 1 p.m. at 10840 Beinhorn Rd.,
Houston

Plant of the Month, *cont'd from pg. 4*

high pest resistance and low fertility requirements. The only negative comment was that it tends to look “ratty” and benefits from regular pruning.³ (Note that leaves can cause allergic reactions in some.) Vitex will perform well given full to part-sun and well-draining soil. A young specimen will need supplemental watering for the first few growing seasons.

A dwarf variety called Blue Diddle was sold at the recent Master Gardeners’ perennials sale. This new Proven Winner grows from 36” to 72” in height and produces lavender blue spikes.

¹Dave’s Garden website, <https://davesgarden.com>

²<https://stateimpact.npr.org/texas/tag/drought/>

³http://ekps.tamu.edu/details?id=406®ion=zone_g

⁴<https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/newsletters/hortupdate/2008/jun08/Vitex.html>

There is quite a bit of lore and fact concerning medicinal uses of Vitex. According to an article by Dr. William Welch of Texas A&M University, the common name ‘Monk’s Pepper’ “refers to the medieval belief that utilizing potions made from the berries helped monks maintain their vows of chastity. Vitex is still an ingredient in herbal remedies for a variety of conditions.”⁴

Vitex is hardy in zones 6-9.

Conserving Water *cont'd from pg. 1*

native plants and exotic plants that require less water. More will be developed or discovered and added to the list if water conservation becomes manda-

tory. Weeding, pruning, appropriate fertilization schedules and pest control can save water.

- Sprinkler systems are used for large areas but low water irrigation methods can be used in beds and potted plants.

It can be used to deliver the

appropriate volume of water straight to the plants' root zone thus conserving precious water. Group plants according to their water requirements. Urban Harvest has a PDF document on low volume irrigation prepared by Angela Chandler, an experienced, renowned gardener in our area at the website <http://urbanharvest.org/documents/118591/605131/Irrigation+Handout/ff1048b3-4a45-41cf-b512-c7ccd1fdb886>.

- This last tip includes the use of rain barrels. By harvesting rainwater you can reduce and supplement the use of municipal water in your landscape. It does not have the additives such as chlorine and fluoride that are present in municipal water. It can lower your water bill and it is more efficient since it does not use the energy

required to pump municipal water to your home. It is an independent water source. Growing up as a child we had a rainwater barrel. I remember when my sisters and I would wash



Fairy Garden xeriscape with succulents

Photo by Terri Simon

our hair. We would occasionally gather on the back porch and my grandfather would ladle fresh rainwater on our hair as a “natural conditioner.” Our hair would feel so soft afterwards. With eight daughters, some of whom had hair that had never been touched by scissors, it was cheaper than cream rinse. Your rain barrel can be discrete or it can be an accent piece in your garden. The choice is yours. Pinterest has several rain barrel designs and rainharvest.com also has several water barrels that can

blend in with your landscape. Tall grasses and other ornamental shrubs can be planted around your rain barrel to disguise it. Don't forget your rain barrel needs maintenance. The website <https://www.rainharvest.com/blog/> has good tips for keeping your rain barrel clean.



Rain barrel design

Photo courtesy of Pinterest

This month our Green Thumb lecture topics include water conservation. Locations and times are listed on our website at <https://hcmga.tamu.edu/2019-green-thumb-gardening-series/>. Please join us to learn more.

Other resources on this topic include:

<https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/extension/xeriscape/xeriscape.html>

<http://extension.udel.edu/factsheets/landscape-design-for-water-conservation/>

<https://www.rainharvest.com/blog/>



Rock wall rain barrel

Photo courtesy rainharvest.com

Open Garden Days at Genoa Friendship Gardens



The Orchard



The Water Garden



The Greenhouse

The Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service and Harris County Master Gardeners invite you to join us

Open Garden Days

on the 3rd Monday of the month, March through October, 8:30 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.
Admission to the Exhibit Gardens is free, and register at the Welcome Table to receive additional monthly notices for children and family events.

The Genoa Friendship Gardens

is located at

1202 Genoa Red Bluff Road

Houston, Texas 77034

Email: phoneHCMGA@gmail.com **Phone:** 713.274.0950

To schedule a special event for your garden club, school or professional organization please contact us to make your arrangements.

- Tour the variety of exhibits to inspire you with vegetable, perennial, rose, tropical and native gardens.
- Meet and talk with a Master Gardener about planting citrus, fruit or berries for your home orchard.
- Contemplate the joy in the Serenity Garden and catch a view of the Water Garden.
- Don't leave the GFG until you have shopped the Greenhouse where seasonal herbs, vegetables and perennials are available for sale until September.

2019 Monthly Open Garden Days & Special Events

February 23	Fruit Tree Sale	June 17	Open Garden Day
March 18	Open Garden Day	July 15	Open Garden Day
March 30	Spring Plant Sale	August 19	Open Garden Day
April 15	Open Garden Day	September 16	Open Garden Day
May 20	Open Garden Day	October 21	Open Garden Day

Second Chance Sale bargains can be found in the Greenhouse after our February and March plant sales.

Open Garden Days at The Weekley Community Center

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

Open Garden Days

one Tuesday each month, January through November, 10:00 –11:00 a.m.

Open Garden Day Activities

is located at 8440 Greenhouse Road, Houston, Texas 77433

For information about upcoming topics, dates and registration, please email us at ogd.harrishort@gmail.com. Registration is required before each program.

Children and their parents looking for hands-on ways to learn, create, and have fun inspire our Open Garden Day volunteers to offer programs that do just that.

This FREE monthly children’s event includes a variety of activities:

- Planting seeds, veggies or ornamentals into pots so children can continue to grow them at home.
- Creating a “nature theme” craft project with materials that are provided.
- 30-40 minute hands-on lesson that focuses on a single topic each month.

Previous lessons have included making a worm farm, putting together a compost bin, learning about the importance of butterflies, and making a feeder to attract pollinators.

Past projects



Seed Pod mobile



Fantasy Garden



Recycled soda bottle

2019 Monthly Open Garden Days

February 26 Registration required by Sun. Feb. 24
March 26 Registration required by Sun. Mar. 24.
April 16 Registration required by Sat. Apr. 13
May 28 Registration required by Sun. May 26
June 25 Registration required by Sun. June 23

July 23 Registration required by Sun. July 21
August 27 Registration required by Sun. Aug. 25.
Sept. 24 Registration required by Sun. Sept. 22
October, November and December dates are TBA at this time.

Gardening Tools

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

		Vegetable Garden Planting Dates for Harris County											Texas AgriLIFE Extension Service Harris County Office 713-274-0950 https://harris.agrilife.org/hort/		
Planting times are for seeds unless otherwise noted		Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec		
		■ Ideal Planting Time ■ Marginal Planting Time													
Artichoke	Dormant Crowns													Transplants	
Asparagus (dormant crowns)															
Beans - Snap & Lima (Butterbean)														Snap	
Beets															
Broccoli (transplants)															
Brussels Sprouts (transplants)															
Cabbage (transplants)															
Cabbage - Chinese (transplants)															
Carrots															
Cauliflower (transplants)															
Chard, Swiss															
Collards (transplants)															
Corn															
Cucumbers															
Eggplant (transplants)															
Garlic															
Kale (transplants)															
Kohlrabi (transplants)															
Leeks	Transplants													Seeds	
Lettuce - also Arugula, Mache, Sorrel															
Melon - Cantaloupe, Honeydew															
Mustard															
Okra															
Onion - bulbing	Transplants													Seeds	
Onion - multiplying/bunching															
Peas - English & Snap															
Peas - Southern															
Pepper (transplants)															
Potato - Irish (cut pieces)															
Potato - Sweet (slips)															
Pumpkin															
Radish															
Spinach															
Squash - Summer															
Squash - Winter															
Tomato															
Turnips															
Summer Greens - Malabar, Amaranth															
Watermelon															

Average Last Freeze Dates (Hobby 2/8, Bush 3/1) ↑ ↑ Average First Freeze Dates (Bush 11/30, Hobby 12/20) ↑ ↑
 Plants grown over winter may require protection during freezing weather. Seeds and transplants started in the heat of summer will benefit from shading during establishment.

Download the
 Vegetable Garden
 Planting Guide here!

TEXAS A&M AGRI LIFE EXTENSION

TEXAS A&M AGRI LIFE EXTENSION SERVICE
3033 BEAR CREEK DR.
HOUSTON, TX 77084
713-274-0950

harris.agrilife.org/program-areas/hort/

hcmga.tamu.edu

Follow Us On Facebook, Twitter & Instagram

The Harris County Master Gardeners as well as Texas A&M AgriLife Extension - Harris County Horticulture are actively participating on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram 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 to your account and easily share information with others. This is a definitely a timesaver for these busy garden days and helps promote our organization.



www.facebook.com/HarrisCountyMasterGardeners
www.facebook.com/HarrisCountyHorticulture



<https://twitter.com/pharrishort>



<https://www.instagram.com/harriscountymastergardeners>



Green Thumb Gardening Series *Water Conservation*

May 9

Barbara Bush Library
6:30 – 8:30 p.m.

May 18

Maude Smith Marks Library
10:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.

May 16

Freeman Branch Library
6:30 – 8:30 p.m.

May 21

Spring Branch Memorial Library
6:30 – 8:30 p.m.