

Urban Dirt

Spring Vegetable Gardening

Gardening Events and Information for Texans

Harris County Master Gardeners Awarded 2020 Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Superior Service Award in Volunteerism

by Brandi Keller, Harris County Master Gardener Program Coordinator

Congratulations to Harris County Master Gardener Volunteers as their program received the agency’s Superior Service Award in Volunteerism. This is an award that is given to recognize outstanding performance in education to Texas residents.

2020 marks the 36th anniversary of the Harris County Master Gardener Program. The ability to offer horticulture education to a population of 4.7 million, extends beyond the realm of two county agents and coordinator, and having an effective volunteer base is critical. Master Gardeners have adapted to the constantly changing environment that Harris County has been subjected to in the last few years, such as the 2016 Tax Day Flood and Hurricane Harvey in 2017 that resulted in the destruction of the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension -Harris County offices, demonstration gardens, greenhouse, and teaching facility. Despite these experiences and their personal losses, these incredible volunteers have continued to educate the public and improve the horticulture skills of the citizens of Harris County.

Since 2016, Harris County Master Gardener volunteers have reached close to 100,000 county residents and have donated more than 59,000 service hours. They have served in every precinct

of Harris County at schools, public events, community centers, senior centers, public gardens, farmer’s markets, garden clubs, and online.

Additionally, they have been able to adapt public outreach during the Covid-19 pandemic by offering online programs that have increased reach

as adults and families watched from home. The pandemic also brought about the transition to an online plant sale platform that enabled ordering from home with a contactless pickup.

This recognition from Texas A&M AgriLife Extension is well-deserved. Many thanks to volunteers that have served as Master Gardeners in Harris County. Congratulations!



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Have Garden Questions? Submit your questions to: <https://hcmga.tamu.edu/ask-a-question/>

UPCOMING EVENTS

FEBRUARY 2021

Green Thumb Gardening Series

We have collaborated with the Harris County Public Library and Houston Community College. Join us for one or both!

Spring Vegetable Gardening

Feb. 8, 10:00 - 11:30 a.m. For HCC program, register in advance to receive the link:

hccs.edu/community-learning-workshops

Feb. 16, 11:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. Simply visit the Harris County Public Library System

No reservation required. Watch on Facebook – facebook.com/harriscountypublive

Educational Programs

Home Grown Lecture Series - This webinar is provided by our Harris County Ag/Natural Resources Department. Registration is required for these free events. Please visit: please visit: homegrown2021Q1.eventbrite.com/

Feb. 4, 10:00 a.m. - *Spring Garden Prep* by Brandi Keller, Harris County Master Gardener Program Coordinator

Feb. 18, 10:00 a.m. - *Spring Vegetable Gardening* by Paul Winski, Texas A&M AgriLife County Extension Agent-Horticulture

Youth Activities

Growing with Plants & Nature

Please visit us on our Growing with Plants and Nature Virtual Group found at the following link: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/GPNVG/>.

Feb. 16, 10:00 a.m. - *Reduce, Reuse, Recycle* by Julee Jackson

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

ONLINE PLANT SALES!

**Genoa Friendship Gardens Fruit Tree & Tomato Sale order pick up
February 20 at Pasadena Fairgrounds**

Campbell Hall, 7601 Red Bluff Rd. Pasadena, TX 77507

West Side Spring Vegetable & Plant Sale

February 5 – February 17

Order pick up: **March 13 at Richard & Meg Weekley Park**
19110 Longenbaugh Rd., Cypress, TX 77433

Genoa Friendship Gardens Peppers, Perennials & Herbs Sale

February 20 – March 5

Order pick up: **March 20 at Genoa Friendship Gardens**
1210 Genoa Red Bluff Road, Houston TX 77034

Please visit us at the social media pages below:

- [Harris County Extension Horticulture Facebook Page](#)
- [Harris County Master Gardeners Facebook Page](#)
- [Harris County Family and Community Health Facebook Page](#)

For more information on COVID-19, please visit the following website:

COVID-19
AgriLife Extension
Web Hub

TEXAS A&M AGRI LIFE EXTENSION

Texas AgriLife Extension Service Horticulture Program in Harris County

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HERB OF THE MONTH

Sweet Cicely (*Myrrhis odorata*)

by Karen McGowan, Master Gardener

Also known as sweet chervil or myrrh, another “sweetheart” of an herb, sweet cicely, is February’s focus. This plant is the sole species in the genus *Myrrhis*, and the ancient Greeks called it *seselis* or *seseli* in reference to its sweet flavor, hence the probable adoption of the common name of cicely.

Sweet Cicely is a perennial herb here in the U.S. in zones 5-9, with its height and spread each ranging between two and four feet. This is one of those rare herb shade lovers, preferring partial to full shade, and in zone 9, would probably do best in full shade. The white blooms

that present themselves in April and May are wonderfully showy and create a nice, bright focal point in what would otherwise be dark and void shady areas of the herb garden. The leaves are fragrant, resembling lace fern, and the maintenance needs are minimal for sweet cicely, which requires only moderate watering. Sweet cicely does have a deep-seating tap root, so if keeping it in a pot, it will require one of a more considerable depth. It has no serious disease or pest issues, and, while it can be assertive, isn’t considered invasive. Just like humans and pets, a well-mannered plant is always welcome in the garden!

Native to grassy banks and woodland areas of central Europe, sweet cicely has widely naturalized in Europe over time. The herb emits a pleasant, anise-like aroma retained even when dried. Somewhat uniquely, all parts of sweet cicely are edible and many herbalists suggest that the herb deserves far

more attention, especially as a healthy, zero-calorie replacement for sugar. To date, however, sweet cicely remains relatively little known in the United States and isn’t grown in many herb gardens. Where it is grown, sweet cicely is tapped as a sugar replacement and a flavor enhancer to salads, soups, and omelets, and the stalks are often used interchangeably with celery.

According to many herb blogs and herb society websites, sweet cicely is a highly favored herb of bee keepers and bee lovers. Two more pleasant, yet totally unrelated sweet cicely

facts: The seeds may be used as a flavoring, e.g. added to ice cream and pies, and were once used to polish and perfume wooden furniture.

While myrrh and garden myrrh are common names sometimes given to this plant, the herb should not be confused with several species of small trees in the genus *Commiphora* which are the source of the aromatic myrrh used in perfumes, incense, and some medicines, as mentioned in the well-known Biblical passage describing

special gifts made by the wise men to the baby Jesus of “gold, frankincense and myrrh.”

With the double-duty of being completely, deliciously edible and a bee attractor, as well as being suited to the oft-forsaken shady spots in the herb garden, sweet cicely could be just the homerun sweetheart your herb garden needs (did you see what I did there?) Happy Valentine’s Day!



Sweet Cicely

Photo by Meneerke bloem

Citations:

<http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/PlantFinder/PlantFinderDetails.aspx?taxonid=276029&isprofile=0%3E>

<https://www.gardeningknowhow.com/edible/herbs/sweet-cicely/growing-sweet-cicely-herbs.htm>

https://herbsociety.org.uk/2020/06/04/all-about-sweet-cicely/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=all-about-sweet-cicely

PLANT OF THE MONTH

Bok Choy

by Don Tyler, Master Gardener

I missed out in January and so I thought I would share an article on what I consider to be a somewhat unique vegetable, i.e., bok choy. Before I go any further, you might know it as bok choy, or pak choi or pok choi.take your pick! For simplicity, I will refer to it as bok choy or Chinese cabbage.

Bok choy has become a standard addition to my fall/winter garden. It is a beautiful plant and I have found it grows quite nicely in our climate. The picture of my bok choy patch this year shows how hardy the plant is and handles our near freezing temperatures without a hint of stress. The Gardening Knowhow website, <https://www.gardeningknowhow.com/edible/vegetables/bok-choy/planting-bok-choy.htm>, echoes my experience, "Fall crops can often be held in the garden until needed and remain usable even after frosts and light freezes."

I direct sow my seeds and my bed is in partial sun. The Spruce website states "Bok choy can handle full sun, but grows best in part shade." (<https://www.thespruce.com/how-to-grow-bok-choy-4125560>)

As you can see in the picture, bok choy does not produce a head but instead you harvest the leaves, or leaf blades.



Bok Choy

Bok choy is a "staple ingredient in Asian dishes. The tender dark leaves and crisp off-white colored stalks provide a nice fresh crunch. The greens have a spinach-like tastes with a very mild bitterness."

(<https://www.jessicagavin.com/how-to-cook-bok-choy/>) Burpee (burpee.com), my seed source, states, "Crisp

tender leaves delicately flavor soups, salads, and stir-fries, and are splendid simply sauteed, steamed or enjoyed raw."



Harvested bok choy leaves

To be honest, I do not eat bok choy. I grew up in West Texas eating chicken fried steak, mashed potatoes and cream gravy! You mowed anything that was green....lol. However, my family loves Asian cuisine and my son is a vegetarian. My bok choy provides an organic source of healthy greens to satisfy their culinary tastes. It has been a particularly helpful crop during the holidays this past year.

Hopefully, you will give bok choy a try!



2021 Harris County Master Gardener Association Online Plant Sales

by Jonathan Correia, Master Gardener

Shop the safe and easy way—online!

Who: Harris County Master Gardener Association

What: 2021 Plant Sales

When: West Side Spring Vegetable & Plant Sale - February 5 – February 17

Genoa Friendship Gardens Peppers, Perennials & Herbs Sale - February 20 – March 5

Where: Online Store at <http://hcmga.tamu.edu>

Why: HCMGA raises funds to provide factual and relevant horticulture information to the public

Helpful information for your new fruit tree

Master Gardener plant sales offer varieties that thrive and produce well in our area. Careful attention is paid to suitable chill hours, hardiness, disease and insect resistance, and fruit quality. Included are more than 100 varieties of fruiting plants: apples, avocados, berries, coffee, figs, goji berries, lemons, limes, oranges, mandarins, mulberries, nectarines, peaches, pears, persimmons, plums, pomegranates, tangerines and more.

Harris County Master Gardener Association is a nonprofit, 501(c)3 incorporated association affiliated with the Texas AgriLife Extension Service in Harris County and the Texas A&M System.

Pick Up Day

For your safety and convenience, you will be assigned a half hour window to pick up your plants at the location you've selected. We ask that you have your vehicle ready for the plants and other purchases to be loaded for you while you wait in your car.

Choosing, planting, and caring for a fruiting plant

Gardening with fruits has been a popular activity for generations, but there is a noticeable surge of interest in edible landscaping. Fruit trees and citrus especially are a large part of edible landscapes in the greater Houston area.

Not only will you enjoy homegrown flavor, but fruit trees also offer beauty in flowers, form, and fragrance. There are fruit trees to suit any landscape, whether a large tree like a pecan, a potted dwarf Meyer lemon for your patio, or a pear, apple, or fig tree to espalier against a wall. Fruit trees can easily be

incorporated into permaculture, the simulation of natural ecosystems intended to be sustainable and self-sufficient.

Choosing your plant

Whether you're an experienced or novice fruit tree grower, here are a few points to keep in mind.

For proper plant growth and fruit production, make sure you have a location that gets at least six hours of sun exposure during the growing season.

Is your choice self-fertile or will it need a pollinating buddy? Refer to the online catalog at <https://hcmga.tamu.edu/files/2020/01/2020-Catalog-Final.pdf> for pollinating requirements as well as chill hour requirements. Several popular choices like apples and blueberries need a pollinating buddy. Check out whether the buddy needs to be the same variety or a different variety.

The online Store at <https://hcmga.tamu.edu> has photos and information on all available plants.

A fruit tree/plant from Harris County Master Gardeners will cost between \$20-\$55. Transplanting costs include soils, compost, mulch, irrigation, and a large planter if it will be container grown.

Caring for your plant before planting

All our fruit trees will be in 3-gallon containers with plenty of compost, mulched soil and slow release fertilizer. Fruit trees are best planted in mid-winter to allow the roots to develop before spring growth and summer heat arrive. With watering and protection from wind and cold temperatures, the plant can be kept in its container for several months before transplanting.

cont'd on pg. 6

2021 Harris County Master Gardener Association Online Plant Sales, *cont'd from pg. 5*

Citrus and avocados can wait until March or April to be planted.

Preparing the planting area

Select a planting location that will get at least six hours of sun per day during the growing season. The sun should not be blocked by buildings, fences, or other obstacles. Choose a spot at least three feet from sidewalks and driveways and eight feet away from buildings, as roots will spread wider than the tree crown. Allow 10-15 feet between fruit trees.

A few months before planting, prepare the site by removing the sod and weeds, roots and all, and thoroughly tilling an area at least 4 feet by 4 feet. Break up any hard pan layer beneath the soil. Level the site, and till again. Spread several inches of compost to the area and work it into the top 8-12 inches of soil. Rake the area smooth and mulch it with 2-3 inches of organic mulch such as leaves, old hay, or composted native mulch. Do not add fertilizers; your new fruits won't need them at first. Let the bed rest until time to plant. If you plan to espalier the fruit against a wall or fence, clean the surface and ground of vines and their roots.

Planting

Rake the mulch back and dig a hole three times the width of the container, about 30-36 inches, and loosen the sides of the hole. Roots do not readily penetrate a slick interface created by clay soil.

Dig the hole a little deeper than the root is tall, and make it wide enough to accommodate the longest roots without bending. Backfill the bottom of the hole with the soil you dug out so that

the root collar—where the stem meets the root ball—is slightly above the ground when it's planted. Loosen the roots on the sides and bottom of the root ball to encourage the roots to grow outward. Prune off any broken, rotted, or twisted roots, making clean cuts with sharp, sanitized pruning shears. Position the plant in the hole, spread the roots, and stand back to make sure it's upright from all angles and is pleasing in its setting. Refill the hole with the original soil, tamping the soil gently around the roots as you go.

Water well to settle the soil around the roots and remove air pockets. If planting in fast-draining soil, water thoroughly to finish settling the soil around the roots. In slower-draining soils, water a little at a time – over several days if necessary. Then make a donut-shaped ridge of mulch 3-4 inches high and 6-8 inches wide around the plant, keeping the mulch 2-3 inches away from the trunk. The ring should be slightly wider than the planting hole.

Stand back again to admire your work.

Caring for your young fruiting plant

For the first year after your new fruit tree is planted, concentrate on the health of the tree rather than getting a crop. Pinch off the fruit during the first year to encourage root growth. You will need to protect your plant from high winds, extreme temperatures, and over or under watering. Keep weeds and lawn from invading the planting area. Monitor your plant regularly for any signs of nutrition loss, fungal or bacterial diseases and non-beneficial insects.

Claim Your Spot on the Plant Sales Teams!

by Jonathan Correia, Master Gardener

There's nothing quite like the buzz at Master Gardener plant sales. These fundraising events make our mission of public education and outreach possible. Miss the camaraderie of working with fellow MG's? Here's your chance to engage. Whether you're new to the program or a veteran volunteer, there is a place for you. Work has already started on the three remaining 2021 plant sales:

February 20 – Genoa Friendship Garden's Fruit Tree & Tomato Sale Pickup in Pasadena

March 13 – West Side Spring Vegetable & Perennial Sale Pickup in Cypress

March 20 – Genoa Friendship Garden's Pepper, Perennial & Herb Sale Pickup at Genoa Friendship Gardens

THE TOP PRIORITY NOW is to add volunteers to the **catalog team**. Click **HERE** to see open positions, and **HERE** for detailed descriptions of each position. Claim your spot and get started by emailing PlantSales.HarrisHort@gmail.com. We are counting on you!



Harris County Master Gardener

2021 Online Sales

Plant Sale Events for 2021

Online Store location

HCMGA.tamu.edu/shop/

Spring Vegetable & Plant Sale March 13
Pick up only location (No in person shopping)

Peppers, Perennials, and Herbs March 20
Pick up only location (No in person shopping)



Online Sale begins
February 5, 2021 through
February 17th, 2021

Pick up @
RICHARD & MEG WEEKLEY PARK
19110 LONGENBAUGH ROAD
CYPRESS, TX 77433

Online Sale begins
February 20, 2021 through
March 5, 2021

Pick up @ New Location
GENOA FRIENDSHIP GARDEN
1210 GENOA REDBLUF ROAD
HOUSTON, TX 77034

In response to the needs of the public we will have contactless sale events for 2021. Our sales will be 100% online and pickup only.

Order at HCMGA.tamu.edu/shop/

Order at HCMGA.tamu.edu/shop/

Ask A Master Gardener - hcmga.tamu.edu/ask-a-question/

Peppers in a Spring Garden

by Terri Simon, Master Gardener

Who can resist their allure? The array of colors, the variety in their shape and the range in flavors and heat. Lately I am trying to grow peppers. I'm not too interested in the super hots. I want my peppers to look like the peppers in the catalogs. Yes, some of those might be photoshopped, I know. I'm interested in growing a range of peppers. Pepper heat is measured in Scoville units. The hotter the pepper, the higher the Scoville unit. A bell pepper has no heat so it has 0 Scoville units. Compare that to the Carolina Reaper. It has Scoville units ranging from 1.6 to 2.2 million. Habanero peppers have a Scoville range of 100,000 to 350,000 units. A jalapeño has a Scoville range of 2,500-6,000 units. I have cowardly taste buds. I can handle the Scovilles in a jalapeño, but that's about it.

That does not stop me from growing some hot peppers, I just don't eat them. I might give some away or let the birds have them. Birds are not affected by capsaicin, the compound present in peppers that give them their heat.

Peppers are known to have been cultivated in prehistoric times in Central and South America. Columbus is said to have introduced peppers to Europe. During that time some countries had a monopoly on the black pepper spice trade. Black pepper cost a fortune and it was a spice people craved. When other explorers showed up with the New World red peppers it was clear an alternative for the expensive black pepper had been found.

Are peppers a fruit or a vegetable? Botanically speaking, peppers are a fruit. From a culinary viewpoint, though, peppers are a vegetable. For the sake of this issue, I'll consider them vegetables of course.

Pepper seeds require heat for germination and in our area the seeds should be started indoors in January. I

have my heat mat ready. This year, I'm trying a new grow light. After the seeds have sprouted on the heating mat and I've transferred them to my grow light stand, I point a small fan at them. At first the fan is further away so that only a mild breeze hits them. As the stalks get stronger I move the fan a little closer. I've gone overboard ordering pepper seeds but we'll see how many I can get to grow.



This year's pepper seeds

Photo by Terri Simon

When it's time to move the plants outside they will need to acclimate. I'll place them outside in a shaded area for a few hours each day, gradually increasing their outside time. After about two weeks they should be ready to transfer to their final home. I may keep a few but more will go to the plant swap. For those of you who like variegated plants, I have two variegated pepper plant suggestions for you. One has a mild flavor, the other is hotter. Both

make beautiful ornamental plants due to the striped variegation on their foliage and the peppers. Candy cane red pepper is classified as a sweet pepper while fish peppers are also variegated and have a Scoville unit of 5,000-30,000.

I'm hoping the variety of peppers I'm growing this year looks like a chile pepper plant mobile. One plant which seems okay this winter is the Zapotec jalapeño from Oaxaca, Mexico. It's a hold-over from last spring. The Zapotec has striations or cracks running down the pepper. This effect is called corking and does not affect the flavor. Some growers like the corking effect but consumers at the stores do not. For my spring seeds I chose several others with unique shapes and colors, and those with unique sounding names. How could I not be enticed by peppers named Purple Marconi, Brazilian Starfish Yellow, Thunder Mountain Longhorn and Saraga Giant Sweet Chocolate? Please wish me a good germination rate with my seeds. I hope you are busy working on your spring garden as well.



Brazilian starfish yellow

Photo courtesy Reddit.com



Zapotec jalapeño

Photo courtesy superhotchiles.com.

The Rose Corner

by Christa Kaiser, Master Gardener

Pruning for Bloom Time

It's close to Valentine's Day and some planning for your rose beds should be done in January/February.

This is the ideal time for bed building. Roses will need 6-8 hours of sun and a reliable watering system. Remember that we build raised beds for our area. Grass can be killed by laying down a layer of newspaper. Having some kind of a border will keep grass and weeds out. Fill with new soil, some companies offer specific soil for roses.

Transplanting can be done till pruning time. Clean the beds and prepare the spot where the rose will be planted. After several years, your roses have used up nutrients, add more humus and new soil to the old soil.

Planting of newly-purchased rose bushes, especially *bare-root roses*, is usually done during the middle weeks in February. Fill a bucket with water and add a little Super Thrive. Put the roses in, so that the water covers the roots for at least one hour. Cut off damaged roots and carefully prune the top. Dig a hole, build a little mound in the middle and carefully place the bush on

top, backfill with soil. Container roses can be planted at any time. Remove the plant carefully from the container, but do not disturb the roots. Do not fertilize freshly planted roses! Apply about a 3-inch layer of mulch once the roses are planted, preferably pine bark mulch or needles.

Before pruning your roses, make sure your pruning shears and saws have been cleaned and sharpened.

Remove all unsightly, unwanted growth and dead canes. Shorten old garden roses by about 1/3rd of its height. Hybrid tea roses are grown for their colorful and fragrant flowers, the shorter you cut the stems, the fewer flowers you will get. When you do your spring pruning, cut all canes back to 10 to 12 inches high.

Fertilize established roses and spray for fungus and insects. Look for "organic solutions".

For "color" in your garden, I recommend antique-old garden- and EarthKind roses. Those roses adapt better to our climate and area.



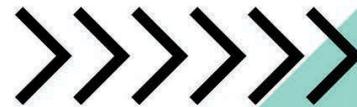
*Antique Rose Emporium, Brenham, TX
Photo by Christa Kaiser*

HomeGrown Lecture Series

Join us every other Thursday
at 10:00 a.m. CST

**JANUARY
FEBRUARY
MARCH** **2021**

- 01/07 **Pollinator Gardens**
Paul Winski - Texas A&M AgriLife County
Extension Agent-Horticulture
- 01/21 **Soil Testing**
Shannon Dietz - Texas A&M AgriLife County
Extension Agent-Agriculture & Natural Resources
- 02/04 **Spring Garden Prep**
Brandi Keller - Harris County Master Gardener
Program Coordinator
- 02/18 **Spring Vegetable Gardening**
Paul Winski - Texas A&M AgriLife County
Extension Agent-Horticulture
- 03/04 **History of Cattle in Texas**
Shannon Dietz - Texas A&M AgriLife County
Extension Agent-Agriculture & Natural Resources
- 03/18 **All About Basil**
Brandi Keller - Harris County Master Gardener
Program Coordinator



**TO REGISTER FOR THIS FREE
EVENT,**

PLEASE VISIT

**[HTTPS://HOMEGROWN2021Q1.
EVENTBRITE.COM/](https://homegrown2021q1.eventbrite.com/)**

**TEXAS A&M
AGRILIFE
EXTENSION**

THE MEMBERS OF TEXAS A&M AGRILIFE WILL PROVIDE EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IN PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES, EDUCATION, AND EMPLOYMENT TO ALL PERSONS REGARDLESS OF RACE, COLOR, SEX, RELIGION, NATIONAL ORIGIN, AGE, DISABILITY, GENETIC INFORMATION, VETERAN STATUS, SEXUAL ORIENTATION OR GENDER IDENTITY AND WILL STRIVE TO ACHIEVE FULL AND EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY THROUGHOUT TEXAS A&M AGRILIFE.

Growing with Plants & Nature

Growing with Plants & Nature has moved all in-person events online until further notice. Please visit us on our Growing with Plants and Nature Virtual Facebook Group found at the following link: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/GPNVG/>

We hope this helps educate families and children on gardening and nature. Programs are tailored to children and their families and include lessons and crafts, combining the Facebook presence and a monthly live Family Zoom Event.

The GPN team is excited about our projects for the coming year. Just a few examples of topics for our Zoom Family Events in 2021 include:

- Reduce, Reuse, Recycle
- Monarch Butterflies
- Wildflowers
- All About Luffas

Also, we will continue our Facebook Group and we'll pass out free supplies for growing microgreens and making bird feeders for families with children at the fruit tree sales.



The January GPN Family Zoom Event featured Master Gardener Candy Friday's presentation on Winter Gardening.

"Winter Gardening" focused on the science behind why indoor plants are beneficial to humans.

The craft project for January was presented by Master Gardener Julee Jackson on "What is a terrarium?" which walked us through the creation of a fun to make terrarium as a way to add plants to the indoor space.

On February 16, 2021 Master Gardener Julee Jackson will present "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle". The presentation will explore the 3 R's.

So, what are the 3Rs?

- Reducing is minimizing the amount of waste we produce in our everyday activities.
- Reusing is looking for ways to use materials again.
- Recycling is converting waste into materials that can be reused. Animals recycle too!

Did you know that people have been recycling for thousands of years? In ancient civilizations, ink used for writing was made out of soot from burning wood or oil!

The craft project for February, by Master Gardener Susan Whitacre, will show several fun and creative ways to upcycle common household items.



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

Getting Down to Earth

by Pam Longley, Master Gardener

News from Genoa Friendship Gardens

The Xeriscape Lost and Found Garden

Immediate HCMG Past President, **Beth Braun**, inherited a garden at GFG from two Master Gardeners who retired and moved to Tennessee. She calls it the *Xeriscape Lost and Found Garden*. Although the garden was well-maintained, it turned into a weedy orphan after they left. There was the ever-challenging torpedo grass, which preferred to hide among the thorny, spiky cacti. Beth's solution was to dig up the specimens and put some of them into pots. During this transition process, she was stung by yellow jackets and wasps that had also taken up residency in the safety of the cacti. Oh, the pain!

The garden is a bit other-worldly in its sandy circle surrounded by fruit trees, a pond and a butterfly garden. There are aloes, *Agave Americana*, the thorny cacti, red yuccas, and Gregg's Prairie Clover (from MG Georgia Lau) watched over by a yellow metal baby giraffe that appears to be eating from the nearby *Vitex* tree. It was placed there by **Jonathan Correia** and friends. There is a bottle tree and a palm transplanted from other garden spaces on the property. There are also pots



A blooming aloe vera and the yellow giraffe sculpture inhabit the Desert garden



of asparagus fern, a pup (offset) of an *Agave Americana* donated by MG **Christa Kaiser**, an elephant bush, scavenged hens and chicks and a pencil cactus Beth found behind the

Agave Americana

education building. So, that's why Beth thinks of it as a Lost and Found Garden.

Beth recalls her earliest interest in gardening was in elementary school when she started collecting small cacti and succulents. More than 50 years later, she says she enjoys having them at home and tending them at GFG. She believes their incredibly diverse colors, shapes, sizes, blooms and easy care make them very attractive choices as potted plants or in Xeriscape gardens.

A previous *Agave Americana* in the garden died after it bloomed, as is their life cycle, and the Precinct 2 road crew came over with a backhoe and carried it off when all traces of the blooms had fallen. It was too huge and unwieldy to dispose of any other way.

Beth says there is a beautiful pattern on the back of the agaves, looking as if they have been imprinted. She learned from garden writer, Kathy Huber, that the agave (also known as a Century Plant) is called "monocarpic", meaning it blooms only once and dies. Kathy called the next generation babies that appear around the mother plant "offsets".



The bloom stem of the *Agave Americana* dies after blooming.



Blooming prickly pear

Beth's *Xeriscape Lost and Found Garden* is a bit of an oddity, but it makes me smile every time I walk by to say "hello". One of the aloes is blooming a candelabra-shaped grouping of peach blooms right now and is really stunning. I think it could be a child's favorite place at GFG, but we might consider a "do not touch sign" for that thorny cacti.

cont'd on pg. 13

Getting Down to Earth, *cont'd from pg. 12*

Christ the Good Shepherd Garden

by Dale Hudson, Master Gardener

If one raises the topic of gardening with friends or family, visions of flowers, fruits, vegetables, herbs, etc., etc., generally come to mind. Rarely does a mention of soil and soil composting make the list. Even when the discussion turns more technical, folks first think of sun and moisture well before they think of soil and the nutrients and microbes living in the organic compost portion of the soil. At the CGS Garden we have been fortunate from the very beginning of our history to have had gardeners who recognized the critical role good soil plays in the success, measured as production, of a vegetable garden.

Going back to 2002 when the spade was first turned to establish the garden in its present location, there was Charles Heimann, a professional chemist volunteer, who understood the science and the importance of composting to build up the soil for a productive garden. When Jerry Landwert, probably the first card carrying member of the HCMGA arrived, there were already composting operations ongoing. Attention was being given to blending of carbon and nitrogen materials, feeding and care of the bacteria and microbes in the compost bins, and regular turning and watering of the piles as they digested.

The next composting enhancements followed when Dale Hudson began working with Jerry. The operation moved from in-ground compost bins to free-standing wire compost silos. On a scheduled rotation these silos were dumped and sifted across an



John Zdansky, Composting Leader, screening compost

inclined screen to harvest finished compost, which was stored in a new weather protected shed, while the unfinished fractions were recycled into the next batch. Upgrades continued when Carlos Domenech, the HCMGA compost go-to guy, took a look and suggested a redesign of the silos to speed up digestion. HCMGA volunteer Lee Talley added his clever design skills and the result was the silo design we have today. Nothing stands still at the garden however. John Zdansky has picked up the baton as the lead composting wizard, and together with Mike Chidalek, our infrastructure guy, they have recently refurbished and upgraded all five silos in our system.

One might ask, Why are you telling me all this? Because at CGS we believe we have the best growing bed soil of any place around. In our composting operation we produce around 25 cubic yards of compost every year. If you need another visual, this is roughly two large dump-truck loads per year. We add two inches of compost to each of our 30 beds twice a year; spring and fall. Our loamy, well-draining soil is rich in nutrients, easy to till and plant, and requires very little commercial fertilizer; mostly additional nitrogen. We love to show folks our operation and share our knowledge on equipment and best practices. For anyone who is interested, we have very detailed information on how to buy materials and construct compost silos just like ours. For those who want specifics on how we mix materials, how we monitor silo temperatures, how and when we turn silos, and how we screen and harvest finished compost, we have an excellent write-up we are happy to share. Better yet, come visit us on a Monday, Thursday or Saturday morning for a show-'n-tell.

cont'd on pg. 14



Mike Chidalek, John Zdansky and Sheila Haskins, CGS Garden Manager in front of free-standing wire compost silos

Getting Down to Earth, cont'd from pg. 13

Centennial Gardens

by Becky Larkin, Master Gardener

Although our regular classes in the McGovern Centennial Gardens have been canceled this year, vegetable gardening education in the Family Garden has continued. Home gardens are the new rage since the pandemic started, and we have many visitors everyday looking for help with their vegetable/herb and ornamental questions. Since January 2020, we have interacted with over a thousand visitors from beginners to veterans seeking help with gardening.



Marisol and Patricio Arteaga talking to a couple about the broccoli

In between visiting with garden guests we are still busy harvesting and planting. With the mild Houston winter, we can plant more crops and more variety than at any other time of the year.

We just finished harvesting our first crops of broccoli and cabbage and started second plantings of both. The tomatoes are finished till March, but the sugar snap peas are beginning to bloom and the onions have gone in. The graffiti and cheddar cauliflower are just starting to make heads, and the first crop of radishes needs to be harvested. One of our goals has been to provide more fresh produce for the food pantry we serve, and we were able to increase our production in 2020 to almost 900 lbs. I am hopeful we can break that record in 2021.



Elizabeth Fisher and Judith Brocklehurst with visitors (the mother and son).

Amaryllis by Morning

Article and photos by Terri Simon, Master Gardener

I abused the first one. I'll admit that. I abandoned that amaryllis in a clay pot on a small table in the back yard and then I ignored it for about five years. With only nature to care for it, that bulb bloomed every spring for five years. Then came the winter it snowed. The cold cracked the pot and the poor bulb finally died. There was no funeral.

Perennials with long flowering seasons and herbs are my plants of choice. Amaryllis bulbs don't fit in either of those categories, but over time my tastes have evolved. If you read the December 2020 *Urban Dirt*, there was an "Easy Peasy Christmas Gift" on page six. That's how I became interested in amaryllis bulbs. At Christmas time I began forcing the bulbs for presents. Occasionally, a bulb would flower before I had a chance to gift it so I would keep it. My own collection didn't grow that much because once I started going to plant swaps the extra bulbs would go with me. Apparently, other gardeners liked them. Now, I do have a few that I treasure.

There are different versions of where the amaryllis flower came from. According to Greek mythology, a woman named Amaryllis won the love of a man named Alteo. How did she accomplish this? She didn't use eharmony or match.com. She did it the old fashioned way. She pricked her heart with a golden arrow and walked along the path to his house daily leaving drops of her blood along the trail. At the end of thirty days beautiful deep red flowers bloomed along the path and Amaryllis won Alteo's heart. Other sources (those botanists) say the Portuguese brought the bulb to Europe from South and Central America. I prefer the golden arrow tale of origin.

Amaryllis bulbs (*Amaryllis belladonna*) have also been called naked lady plants and the Belladonna lily. Bulbs which can bloom in the winter are popular. Particularly when bulbs with red, white and pink blooms are available along with many other colors. Bicolor amaryllis (flowers with two colors) are also available.

Growing amaryllis is fairly easy. Varieties of amaryllis can grow up to 26 inches tall and some may have flowers ten inches across. Their bloom season can last from November to May. One of their biggest advantages is that they can be forced to grow indoors and come in bloom during the holidays. If planting outdoors use a media that has a high organic content. The bulbs like good air circulation and good drainage. Do not plant the bulb too deep. The tip above the shoulders should be sticking out of the soil. Do not fertilize. The bloom this plant produces was fed

by previous growth. They love the sun but protect them from Texas southern exposure full afternoon sun. I plant my amaryllis bulbs in pots that are a tight fit. They seem to be happy with the arrangement. Social distancing for plants. Do not overwater or spray water into the bulb's "nose". Depending on the temperature (ideal of 70-75 degrees) and the amaryllis variety, the bulb should flower in four-to-eight weeks. For information on how to prepare your amaryllis for its next bloom cycle, there are several videos available on youtube and the internet. If you are feeling adventurous, try the video at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=juj9uVcHHik>



Amaryllis varieties from upper left: Double Dream (pink) and Picasso in background, Evergreen, La Paz and Moon Scene

There are different varieties of amaryllis bulbs available. These include singles, doubles, nymphs, small flowered types and the cybisters. The cybister amaryllis blooms are from the *Hippeastrum cybister* variety. They tend to have smaller bulbs and flowers. Bulbs in the cybister group will not lose their leaves like other amaryllis groups. Their leaves are thinner and evergreen.

Do some of you think your favorite plants have traits that you admire? I think a few of mine do. When I see my amaryllis bulbs come to life with so little effort, I see tenacity. When they bloom I admire their poise and pristine look. Their colors sing and crackle to me. How do your plants make you feel?

Green Thumb 2021 Gardening Series

The Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service and the Harris County Master Gardeners are pleased to offer the FREE *Green Thumb Gardening Series of Lectures* now provided virtually twice a month. We have collaborated with the Harris County Public Library and Houston Community College. Join us for one or both!
Got questions? Go to hcmga.tamu.edu/ask-a-question/

Second Monday, 10:00 A.M. – 11:30 A.M. Houston Community College

Register in advance to receive the link: hccs.edu/community-learning-workshops
Second Monday of each month

January 11 – *Pruning Basics*
February 8 – *Spring Vegetable Gardening*
March 8 – *Composting*
April 12 – *Butterfly Gardens*
May 10 – *Integrated Pest Management*

June 14 – *Intro to Plumeria*
July 12 – *Fall Vegetable Gardening*
August 9 – *Gardening for Beginners*
September 13 – *Permaculture*
October 11 – *Plant Propagation*

Third Tuesday, 11:00 A.M. – 12:00 P.M. Harris County Public Library Facebook Live

No reservation required. Watch on Facebook – facebook.com/harriscountyppl/live
Third Tuesday of each month

January 19 – *Pruning Basics*
February 16 – *Spring Vegetable Gardening*
March 16 – *Composting*
April 20 – *Butterfly Gardens*
May 18 – *Integrated Pest Management*

June 15 – *Intro to Plumeria*
July 20 – *Fall Vegetable Gardening*
August 17 – *Gardening for Beginners*
September 21 – *Permaculture*
October 19 – *Plant Propagation*



Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service provides equal opportunities in its programs and employment to all persons, regardless of race, color, sex, religion, national origin, disability, age, genetic information, veteran status, sexual orientation, or gender identity. The Texas A&M University System, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the County Commissioners Courts of Texas cooperating. Individuals with disabilities, who require an auxiliary aid, service or accommodation in order to participate in any Extension activities, are encouraged to contact the Harris County Extension Office at 713-274-0950 for assistance five working days prior to the activity.



*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

**As a public health precaution to help prevent the spread of Covid-19,
Harris County Master Gardeners have suspended in-person
educational events until further notice.**

**However, this garden is a public space, so you are still welcome to visit
according to the guidelines set forth by Hermann Park Conservancy. The Harris
County Master Gardeners maintain the vegetable, herb, berry, and citrus beds in
the Family Garden, so if you see one of us working there, feel free to say hi.**

McGovern Centennial Gardens at Hermann Park

1500 Hermann Drive

Houston, Texas 77004

When events resume: free tours and children's activity. "Adult workshop at 10:30 a.m.

No registration required.

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.

For Harris County Master Gardeners Only!

February 13th & 27th
GFG Garden Workdays!

8:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

1210 Genoa Red Bluff Road, Houston TX



Appropriate Covid-19 protocols will be observed. As a reminder, please remain socially distanced at least six feet apart, wash your hands and use hand sanitizer. If working closer than six feet, a mask is required.

Genoa Friendship Garden Workdays are an opportunity for Interns and Master Gardeners to meet with other gardeners, and to learn by working in a variety of gardens. Test your practical gardening skills and learn from other gardeners' knowledge. Explore the various options of working in a collection of gardens with perennials, proven Earth-Kind winners, the fruit tree orchard, native plants, composting, and greenhouse activities.

Come and enjoy a few hours working in the garden with fellow Gardeners while gaining your required membership service hours. Work tasks will be outlined, and available to gardeners to seek their interest. Garden leads will be on hand to guide you through the tasks.



For some of you that have considered this a distance you couldn't commit to on a regular basis, it is *always* available if you want to be surrounded by old or new friends.

GFG also offers Mon./Wed. workdays (8:45 a.m. – Noon) for MGs who can attend during the week.

Please join us at our GFG Garden Workdays!

Evan J. Hopkins
Master Gardener



Have Garden Questions?



We have developed a new form located at <https://hcmga.tamu.edu/ask-a-question/>

You can submit your question and up to three photos. Be sure your photos are focused and clear.



Please subscribe to our Harris County Horticulture YouTube page for access to recorded videos.

Thank you for your support.

<https://www.youtube.com/channel>



Master Gardeners and Interns who celebrate a birthday during *February* include the following. Wish them a **HAPPY BIRTHDAY** when you see them!

Karen Avery, Taffy Dineen, Alexa Haass, Martha Gossett, Vicki Harbers, James Hobkirk, Marcia Long, Deborah Pavlosky, Mariana Pena-Dell, Robbie Sharp, Susan Visinsky-Bracken, and Hallie Younker

If your name is missing, please check that your online profile is complete.

Nominate a Master Gardener of the Month

We want to recognize the people who are working hard to keep our organization functioning.

To let the Membership committee know about the volunteers deserving of the award, contact

Karen Breneman at kbreneman2017@gmail.com or phone at 281-463-2110 or 832-923-1712.

Thank you in advance for your nomination.

Gardening Tools

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

Planting times are for seeds unless otherwise noted	Vegetable Garden Planting Dates for Harris County											
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
Artichoke	Dormant Crowns								Transplants			
Asparagus (dormant crowns)									Transplants			
Beans - Snap & Lima (Butterbean)			Snap&Lima					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

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EXTENSION SERVICE
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HOUSTON, TX 77040
713-274-0950

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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. Reach us via these links:



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



<https://twitter.com/pharrishort>



<https://www.youtube.com/channel>



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



Green Thumb Gardening Series *Spring Vegetable Gardening*

The Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service and the Harris County Master Gardeners are pleased to offer the FREE Green Thumb Gardening Series of Lectures now provided virtually twice a month. We have collaborated with the Harris County Public Library and Houston Community College.

Feb. 8, 10:00 - 11:30 a.m. For HCC program, register in advance to receive the link:
hccs.edu/community-learning-workshops

Feb. 16, 11:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. Simply visit the Harris County Public Library System
No reservation required. Watch on Facebook – [facebook.com/harriscountyp/live](https://www.facebook.com/harriscountyp/live)

Would you like to contribute to the Urban Dirt?

Send all questions and/or submissions to: UrbanDirt.harrishort@gmail.com