

Urban Dirt

Composting!

Gardening Events and Information for Texans

The Back Story on Composting

by Terri Simon, Master Gardener

Composting is an ancient farming and gardening practice that uses organic materials which have decomposed into a material similar to soil. Loaded in nutrients, it has been used throughout the ages to enrich the soil that crops and plants are grown in. The first record dates back to 2334 B.C. It was mentioned on clay tablets of the Akkadian Empire. Other ancient groups used compost as well. It is mentioned in the Talmud, the Bible and numerous other writings. Many of our founding fathers who farmed used the method as well. New England farmers borrowed a trick from Native Americans who used fish parts while planting their crops.

Sir Albert Howard popularized the Indore method of composting. He lived in India and for thirty years he practiced organic gardening. In 1943, his book "An Agriculture Testament" became popular and piqued gardeners' interest in organic farming. In the United States, I.E. Rodale published a monthly magazine called "Organic Gardening" and Americans became familiar with composting. As more Americans become interested in gardening, composting is becoming more popular.



Sir Albert Howard

It is estimated that between 20-30 percent of garbage left curbside could be reduced if everyone composted acceptable materials. Kitchen scraps (no dairy or meat products), dry leaves and grass clippings can all be recycled as compost. Animal and human manure were also added to the compost pile but this changed once sewage systems became popular. In 1840 Justus von Liebig, a German scientist discovered that plants could use chemical fertilizers and thrive.

Today the pendulum has swung and composting has become popular once again. Not only does organic compost supply nutrients but it can



Graphic courtesy tamu.edu

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

UPCOMING EVENTS

MARCH 2021

Green Thumb Gardening Series

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

Composting

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

hccs.edu/community-learning-workshops

Mar. 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/harriscountyppl/live

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/

Mar. 4, 10:00 a.m. - *History of Cattle in Texas* by Shannon Dietz, Texas A&M AgriLife County Extension Agent - Agriculture and Natural Resources

Mar. 18, 10:00 a.m. - *All About Basil* by Brandi Keller, Harris County Master Gardener Program Coordinator

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/>.

Mar. 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

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

Order pick up: **March 19th – March 21** at Genoa Friendship Gardens
1210 Genoa Red Bluff Road, Houston TX 77034

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 19th – March 21** 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 AgriLife Extension Service Horticulture Program in Harris County

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713.274.0950

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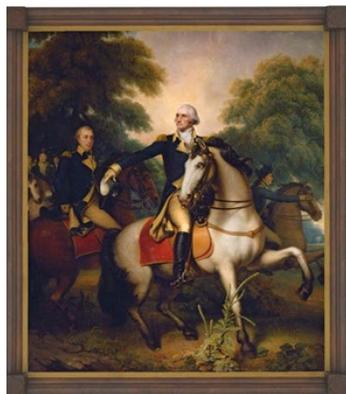
Terri Simon

HERB OF THE MONTH

Mullein (*Verbascum Thapsus*)

by Karen McGowan, Master Gardener

In Rembrandt Peale's painting *Washington before Yorktown*, March's herb focus, mullein, is featured prominently in the foreground, a fading specimen of the biennial herb positioned alongside the pawing hooves of Washington's steed, its stance full of determination and attentiveness, restless for whatever lies



Washington before Yorktown

ahead. Botanists are confident of the plant's identification in the painting, while the meaning of its positioning is debated somewhat by art historians, who alternately believe mullein's presence signifies the birth of a new nation, or that its depicted waning life suggests the death of things old (it seems an impractical argument, as don't we find – in the garden, certainly,

and elsewhere -- that death simply makes room for life?). Still, I suppose it's an interesting discussion, at least for we plant and art people. According to The National Gallery of Art, "the large mullein plant in the foreground plays an important role in the painting. Also known as Aaron's rod, this medicinal herb was used to treat various physical ailments and, according to folklore, to cast out evil spirits. Peale included it as a symbol of Washington's character in his ambitious portrayal of the military leader preparing to vanquish George III's English forces." If this is true, that Peale chose the plant as a symbol of Washington's character, what a lofty and honorable designation for a plant that some consider a nuisance weed. Let's take a closer look at mullein!

A member of the Scrophulariaceae or figwort family, mullein is native to Europe. The family name of mullein may have derived from the word scrofula, a disease that is now understood to be a form of tuberculosis. In Ireland, mullein was widely cultivated as a remedy for tuberculosis. The seed is said to have arrived on the North American continent in the dirt used as ballast in old sailing vessels.

Citations:

<https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.178141.html>

<https://www.nybg.org/blogs/plant-talk/2014/02/history/history-underfoot-george-washingtons-mullein/>

<https://www.encyclopedia.com/plants-and-animals/plants/plants/mullein#:~:text=Like%20many%20plants%20of%20European,fa%20back%20as%20ancient%20Rome.&text=One%20name%20for%20mullein%20is%20miner's%20candle.>

Considered one of 23 important healing herbs in medieval Jewish medical practice, mullein's large stalk was used as a ceremonial torch as far back as ancient Rome. Stripped of its leaves and dipped in tallow, the cylindrical spike could hold a flame when carried aloft from place to place. Another name for mullein is miner's candle; during the 1849 California gold rush, mine shafts glowed by way of mullein torches carried by the prospectors. Mullein leaves were used by Native Americans as tinder to start fires, or as a smudge. The smoke was inhaled to relieve pulmonary congestion. Mullein leaf, which some tribes called "big tobacco," was mixed with nicotine leaf and smoked to relieve asthma.



At least five species of mullein have naturalized in North America. This sturdy and adaptive herb is found on roadsides, rocky and gravelly banks, and in marginal areas throughout the world. It thrives in full sun and adapts well to arid conditions. The seeds of this hardy plant, particularly *V. blattaria*, may remain viable for as long as 70 years.

Common mullein produces seeds prolifically. Seeds often germinate in disturbed areas of roadways, fields and river banks. As long as full sun is provided, this is a plant that can grow up to ten feet tall. So much for this herb in your pocket garden.

While not every herb highlighted in these monthly articles is a match for a personal garden, there is a lot of fun in the exploring. In the case of this month's herb, an herb good enough to be immortalized with our first president and founding father, George Washington, is certainly good enough for me! Looking forward to spring, and new things to come – happy gardening!

PLANT OF THE MONTH

Wildflowers

by Don Tyler, Master Gardener

Over the past couple of years, I have become very interested in wildflowers, those rather unassuming “weed” flowers growing along the roadsides or randomly in parks and along pathways we now routinely visit because of our new COVID lifestyle.

I try not to promote a particular company when I write these articles but my first exposure was the Native American Seed catalog (www.seedsource.com). WOW....I could hardly put it down and as a self-proclaimed impulse buyer of all things plant related,

it was not long before I had my first four packets of wildflower seeds! (BTW....I have thrown in a couple of pictures that I took in January. Obviously, January is not going to be a month bursting in color from wildflowers, but I even have a couple still blooming.)

Last year we planted four beds of wildflowers.

We purchased seed mixes for sun, partial sun and shade areas of our yard. Again, there are several reliable seed suppliers but for my first go at wildflowers, I picked the Butterfly Retreat Mix, Bee Happy Mix, Plant-in-Spring or Fall – All Perennial Mix and Shade-Friendly Wildflower Mix from the Native American Seed catalog. Two of the four beds have developed quite nicely. The other two struggled primarily due to not following good gardening practices. Yes, they are wildflowers, so one would think all you have to do is just toss them on the ground. However, as I have learned over the years, a little preparation will go a long way in having a successful gardening experience and planting wildflowers is no exception.



As with all things related to horticulture, we are blessed to have the resources of Texas A&M at our fingertips. They have a website dedicated to wildflowers, “Wildflowers In Bloom”, <https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/wildseed>. They have photos,

growing information, links to seed suppliers, seed mixes and links to various helpful resources. In the growing information section, there is a nice how-to guide entitled, “How Do I Plant My Wildflowers”, which outlines the basic steps for planting wildflowers. Having read through this guide, I am convinced I

did not do enough to “eliminate any vegetation which may compete with the wildflowers” in a couple of my beds. Either way, two out of four is not all that bad for a novice and besides who knows what might pop out of the ground this spring. You never really know with wildflowers!

One last thought.....I was glancing through the seed catalog from Prairie Moon Nursery, another source of native seeds, and they mentioned the following quote from Michael Weisham, the former host of the PBS series, ‘The Victory Garden’,

‘If you’re a gardener, you’re never that isolated.’

That is what I find in gardening....I hope you will consider establishing a wildflower garden this spring. Not only will you find the burst of colors refreshing but the butterflies, hummingbirds and other pollinators will make your landscape come alive and you may just not feel so isolated during these weird times.





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: 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.

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

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

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.

The Backstory on Composting, *cont'd from pg. 1*

improve soil aeration and boost the soil's ability to retain nutrients and water. We have numerous composting methods and tools for making the perfect compost. I expect the number of home gardener compost piles will continue to grow. Home composting uses available materials, is cheap, organic and allows gardeners and farmers to control what is added to their plants. To learn more about compost visit the website <http://www.carryon-composting.com/441149734>. The *Green Thumb Lecture Series* will also lecture on composting on March 8th and 16th. For more info check out the [link https://hcmga.tamu.edu/events/2021-03/](https://hcmga.tamu.edu/events/2021-03/). The extension office also has a good composting reference at <https://agriflifeextension.tamu.edu/library/gardening/composting/>.

Symptoms	Problem	Solution
The compost has a bad odor.	Not enough air	Turn it. Add dry material if the pile is too wet.
The compost is not breaking down, and the center of the pile is dry.	Not enough water	Moisten and turn the pile.
The compost is damp and sweet-smelling but will not heat up.	Not enough nitrogen	Mix in a nitrogen source such as fresh grass clippings, fresh manure, or blood meal.
The compost is damp and warm only in the middle.	Too few materials and too small area	Collect more material and mix the old ingredients into a new, larger pile.
From <i>Composting and Mulching: A Guide to Managing Organic Landscape Refuse</i> by Wayne J. McLaurin (retired) and Gary L. Wade, Extension Horticulturists, The University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service.		

Graphic courtesy tamu.edu

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:

- Date TBD** – 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/

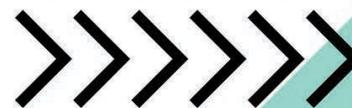
Ask A Master Gardener - hcmga.tamu.edu/ask-a-question/

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 and Nature offers children and their families opportunities for learning about gardening and nature. To support social distancing we have focused on creating virtual programs.

Our Facebook Group is found at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/GPNVG> It is filled with educational and fun information, games, puzzles, and crafts.

We also present a monthly Family Zoom Event on a different topic each month. For more information about upcoming topics and dates, check out our Facebook Group. Please register for Family Zoom Events at ogd.harrishort@gmail.com. Please use this email for questions, information or comments about all of our Growing with Plants and Nature activities.

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:

- Monarch Butterflies
- All About Luffas
- Wildflowers
- Texas Wildlife

In January and February the GPN team prepared almost 200 pine cone bird feeders and microgreen kits to give to families with children at the Fruit Tree Sales.

The February Family Zoom Event is postponed until March 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. Did you know, 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 March, by Master Gardener Susan Whitacre and Intern Tony Masraff, 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

Master Gardener, **Janice Muhm**, has been the GFG Greenhouse Manager since 2015. She is in charge of the irrigation, lighting, heating/ventilation and has participated in the planning for improvements to these systems, as well as the repair and maintenance of the structure. The 2021 plan is to replace the grow lights and make improvements to the irrigation system. Janice's primary focus has been propagating perennials and succulents to sell to the public on



Janice Muhm, GFG greenhouse manager

Open Garden Days. This was generating about \$1500.00 per year until COVID-19 shut down these events, for now.

The GFG greenhouse is where many of the herbs, tomatoes and peppers are started from seed for the plant sales. Plants are then stored here before the sales, and any unsold items are held and available for sale to Master Gardeners at a deep discount. The plant trials team and production garden team also use the greenhouse to propagate seeds and to bump up the plants prior to setting them in the beds.

Unfortunately, during the Big Winter Storm in February, the power went out to the heaters that were the lifeline for many of the tender plants. All of the tomato plants died that were to be in the February sale! This contributed to the postponement of the sale pickup on February 20th.



Tomato plants for February sale (now deceased).

There was no way to buy more quickly enough. Our trial petunias have survived, though!



Inside the GFG greenhouse

The Saturday before the Big Winter Storm hit, **Rick Castagno, Evan Hopkins, Carolyn Boyd, Pam Longley and Kathryn and Doug McLeod** went out to GFG to cover the plant trial beds

and the production gardens in a 35 degree brisk north wind. There was a giant roll of the thickest row cover I have ever seen cleverly positioned on the ceiling of the equipment shed. We were able to pull and cut pieces fairly easily. There was enough to cover all but 1/2 of one of the beds. Then, all we could do is leave it to Mother Nature. Job well done!



A few perennial residents of the greenhouse

cont'd on pg. 11

Getting Down to Earth, *cont'd from pg. 10*

Christ the Good Shepherd Garden

by Dale Hudson, Master Gardener

This time of the year most of the country is bundled up and protecting their tender vegetation, if they even have any. Not so however for those of us along the Gulf coast. Like the duck on the pond, we may appear to be drifting along, but we are paddling furiously beneath the surface. At the CGS garden every bed is in production, and that is only part of the story. Spring is coming!!! How do we know??? The martins are back. CGS Garden has always had the welcome mat out for the insect devouring martins. As soon as we see the male “scouts” show up looking for lodging we kick the sparrows out of our bird houses and clean them up for the martins. And if you are looking for action, check out the greenhouse, but more on that later.

When you enter our garden the first thing you see are carrots. We plant those in the Fall and at the first sign of Spring they leap into action and give us an early crop. Next comes our spinach, and then the beets. They grow all Winter and love the cooler days. Then comes kale and swiss chard. Tucked at the ends of these beds are radishes. We keep a radish patch going year-round if we can. They are so quick and easy to grow and popular with both gardeners and pantries.

Next is a trellis loaded with sugar peas. These are in full bloom in mid-February and don't mind a little frost. By the end of the month we will be picking tender young pods for salads and stir-fry creations.

Right next door are the TXAgriLife trial beds for kale and swiss chard. This is



Tomatoes and more tomatoes in the greenhouse. Ken Bache cleans out the Purple Martin house. Sweet peas in full bloom.



Sheila Haskins, our garden manager with a recent winter harvest.

their time to shine. We are harvesting every 10-14 days and collecting data on the seven varieties relative to each other.

We are putting a wrap on the brassica season. You will find us harvesting the last bits of cabbage, cauliflower, and broccoli. But next door are 2 beds of turnips just hitting their peak. We always have good luck with turnips and the pantries love them.

Finally comes our onion beds. This is our largest winter crop with eight beds of 250 each. Our favorite is the 1015Y Super Sweet, but we include a couple beds of the Southern Belle Red for diversity.

Now let's check out the greenhouse. Be careful if you venture in there because you may get trampled. It is chock full of people and 50-paks, and solo cup bump-ups and lots of humidity. To-

matatoes are everywhere; so are peppers, but one will find basil, beets, marigolds, and a few other



Basil for the herb beds, then later to become the secret ingredient in the annual CGS Spaghetti Dinner.

things identified only by the name on their popsicle sticks. We start in mid-January seeding the six varieties of tomatoes that we select for planting in the six beds of tomatoes we cultivate each year. Around the first of February we seed the peppers. Normally we do 4 or 5 varieties, but this year we have kicked off a TXAgriLife pepper trial involving an additional nine varieties. The trial will look at varieties from sweet bells to fiery habaneros, so we are anticipating things to get very interesting later this summer. We'll have more to say about our trial next month when the weather heats up and we get them in the ground.

cont'd on pg. 12

Getting Down to Earth, cont'd from pg. 11

Centennial Gardens

by Becky Larkin, Master Gardener

The partnership between the Hermann Park Conservancy and Harris County Master Gardeners and AgriLife has been a great success. While the City of Houston owns Hermann Park, the Hermann Park Conservancy is a non-profit, citizen-led organization responsible for the management and maintenance of Hermann Park. The HPC staff gardeners are responsible for all of Hermann Park's landscaping, so they work in a variety of areas. In addition, they share their professional knowledge with Master Gardeners at our Tuesday lessons: life cycle and host plants of the monarch butterfly and in-depth tours of the rose and arid gardens.



New Family Garden beds built by HPC staff

In our partnership with HPC, Master Gardeners have unlimited access in the Family Garden, and the gardening staff is frequently in the garden helping us with regular maintenance to keep the garden looking its best. Each year, they rebuild beds where the wood has rotted, scuffle-hoe paths, deliver mulch, and carry away our piles of clippings and trash on a regular basis. Recently, they showed up with trailers of new kiddie cushion mulch for the paths between the beds, and spent the day shoveling and raking. We are indebted not only to the Conservancy for the great opportunity to use the Family Garden for educational programs, but also to the staff gardeners for their constant support of our work.



HPC staff gardeners mulching the pathways

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.



Public Help Sought to Report Fish and Wildlife Impacted by Winter Storm Uri

AUSTIN – Recent snowfall and freezing temperatures affected many fish and wildlife species throughout the state and now Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) is asking for the public’s help in reporting any animal mortality events they observe on their property, ranches, or in their neighborhoods through this project on the iNaturalist website. Citizens are encouraged to report observations so that biologists can better understand the impacts of Winter Storm Uri to natural resources.

The prolonged period of subfreezing temperatures, coupled with a limited availability of food resources due to snow and ice has had some impact on wildlife resources; however, given the secretive nature of most wildlife species, the full extent of the impact cannot yet be determined. Some of the wildlife species impacted by the storm include exotic, non-native ungulates like axis deer, blackbuck and nilgai antelope that originate in temperate climates, various bat species and multiple bird species.

While TPWD has no regulatory authority regarding the management of exotic species, the cold weather did have a significant impact on these species. Native species like white-tailed and mule deer are much more tolerant to these extreme cold weather events than the exotics.

TPWD does not foresee any significant losses of white-tailed or mule deer. Noticeable white-tailed deer mortalities, except for a few older deer, are not being reported. Some mortality of very old white-tailed deer, or those in poor body condition, is to be expected.

Despite the potential significant loss of axis and blackbuck, this mortality event may lower free-ranging exotic populations in areas of the Texas Hill Country where they were overpopulated, ultimately helping native habitats that benefit white-tailed deer and other wildlife.

At this time, the more pressing concern is possible impacts the cold weather had on the native deer habitat in some regions. In South Texas, some brush species still had green leaves prior to the freeze and snowfall. Now, however, TPWD staff are noticing many shrubs shedding leaves and turning brown. Additionally, the winter herbaceous vegetation, which are critical for deer this time of year and into the early spring, were impacted and burned

by the freezing temperatures. TPWD is hopeful that, despite the cold temperatures, the moisture from the snow and ice was able to be absorbed by the soil and as temperatures warm up, the usual spring green-up will take place statewide.

Across the state, citizens, biologists, and park employees are reporting dead bats under bridges, along with finding live bats that were downed due to the freeze because of dehydration, starvation, and cold body temperatures. Currently, wildlife rehabilitators and other organizations are being inundated with the bats that survived the storm and doing everything they can to help.

Should citizens find dead or live bats, it’s extremely important that people do not handle bats. The best course of action is to record the observation via iNaturalist and then, if the downed bat is still alive, contact a rehabilitator. A list of wildlife rehabilitators can be found on the TPWD website as well as on the Bat World Sanctuary website.

TPWD staff continue to receive reports of dead birds, including waterfowl. Biologists have received reports of dead songbirds and woodpeckers, possibly resulting from poor body condition and lack of cover from ongoing drought conditions in certain habitats. Insectivorous and nectivorous bird species likely suffered greater losses than other bird species. Quail, however, fared well according to some reports. Richland Creek Wildlife Management Area (WMA), among other WMAs with wetland ecosystems, reported hundreds of dead coots and multiple dead Blue-winged Teal.

As staff are able to continue visiting field sites, along with reports from the public through iNaturalist, TPWD will be able to better analyze the long term Winter Storm Uri impacts on wildlife and other resources.

4200 Smith School Road, Austin, Texas 78744, tpwd.texas.gov/newsmedia

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*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.

Stop! Don't Prune Your Plants That Froze!

by Brandi Keller, Harris County Master Gardener Program Coordinator

What do we do with our plants after the freeze? You've likely heard the answer a dozen times in the last week, but it's the only answer to give. Leave them be.

Freeze damage may appear immediately or show up weeks (even months) later. When a rare freeze does impact us, many are left wondering if our plants can be salvaged. First and foremost, do not prune them. Even though cold snaps may be behind us, this is 2021, so who knows what could happen. If they are pruned, it creates a fresh injury that could be damaged by a another freeze. We've heard the phrase lately, "learn to like ugly," but beauty is in the eye of the beholder. It does not have to be ugly if we know it's giving shelter to critters that may need it, like our native Carolina (green) anole. These anoles tolerate colder temperatures better than the invasive Cuban Brown anoles, which may give them a slight advantage, finally.

This is truly a situation that forces us all to wait and see. Numerous variables come into play, like local temperature, location of planting, moisture at freeze, mulch or protection taken, and general hardiness. Tropical plants may appear dead, but come back from the ground. Woody plants are best left until they show new growth, then everything above can be pruned. What you can do now is remove very soft or mushy leaves to reduce risk of disease. Use the scratch test to see if there is live wood under the bark. Scratch or cut a small piece away from the branch. If it is green or white, it is alive. Brown indicates dead wood. By mid-March, risk of frost is over, so let the cleanup begin!



Lantana elsewhere, is used as an annual or perennial, so dieback is expected. If there is green wood further into the plant, then it will grow from there.



Sago palms (not a palm) tend to be cold hardy in Harris County, but dropping to 19° has likely caused all leaves to brown. If the trunk and leaf crown are hard, it should be fine.



This sweet orange may show more signs of damage in the weeks to come, but will likely pull through. Lemons, limes, and citrons are at the most risk of loss.



Loquat is hardy to 10°, so most trees will be ok. Mature trees look better than this medium-sized one that has experienced more tip damage. Fruit will be lost this year.



Most oleander leaves and stems may be dead, but once cut, it should come back from the ground.



Variegated ginger looked fabulous before the freeze hit, then immediately browned. They should come back next year.

MG of the Month - *Michelle Getz*

by Karen Breneman, Master Gardener

Congratulations to **Michelle Getz!**

Michelle, a 2018 graduate, is a retired professional portrait photographer. She volunteers at the Genoa Friendship Gardens where she leads the perennial demonstration garden. Most recently she created a garden demonstrating Earth-Kind® plants. Earth-Kind gardens combine best practices of organic and traditional gardening to create an effective and environmentally responsible landscape. Even with the pandemic restrictions, Michelle achieved over 70 volunteer hours for 2020!

She is an artist working in multi-media and ceramics and has a small ceramics business with her sister. They have a shop on Etsy called *Wicked Garden Pottery* and also participate in sales and markets around the city. Michelle specializes in specialty plant pots – pots for orchids, African violets and carnivorous plants. Prior to the pandemic she did a lot of traveling and is planning trips to the Galapagos islands and southern Europe in the fall.

Thank you, Michelle for all your hard work!



Michelle Getz

To learn more about Earth-Kind landscaping visit
<https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/earthkind/>

Nominate a Master Gardener of the Month

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

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

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

Thank you in advance for your nomination.

2019 Master Gardener Graduates

by Brandi Keller, Harris County Master Gardener Program Coordinator

Congratulations to the new Graduating Class! We had 21 members of the 2019 class graduate after fulfilling their required 60 service hours, with a class total of more than 2,100 hours. This service was completed all around Harris County at gardens, community centers, farmer’s markets, public events, online events, plant sales and more. 2020 was a unique year, but we appreciate the contributions they made with all the adaptations that were required. We know you will all go on to contribute much more in 2021 as newly minted Certified Master Gardeners.

Master Gardeners are members of the local community who take an active interest in gardens and landscapes. They are trained by Texas A&M AgriLife Extension as volunteers to assist in the mission of providing research-based education in horticulture. They give lectures, answer gardening questions, conduct research, provide demonstration gardens, and share their knowledge with residents of Harris County.

CONGRATULATIONS!

**MASTER GARDENER
GRADUATING
CLASS OF 2020**

Cindy Barger	Kent McLemore
David Butler	Jennifer Patterson
Debra Caldwell	Lois Pierce
Valerie Depew	Adrian Ruiz
Lee Greb	Kelly Shannon
Karen Gorgol	Robbie Sharp
Jerri Grimland	Jo Ann Stevenson
Karen Kabacinski	Stan Stevenson
George Kabacinski	Mary Stokman
Pam Longley	Jarvis Taylor
Sara Maier	

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HARRIS COUNTY

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For Harris County Master Gardeners Only!



March 27th GFG Garden Workday!

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 *March* include the following. Wish them a **HAPPY BIRTHDAY** when you see them!

Rebecca Asher, Lisa Bedford, Larry Brouwer, Karen Gorgol, Louise Hansen, Evan Hopkins, Parry Kahkeshani, Lisa Lawrence, Kent McLemore, John Moss, Jennifer Patterson, Linda Pearson, Joe Peddy, Betty Rexrode, N Jean Robinson, Julia Sweet, Kim Treas and Susan Whitacre

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

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&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

TEXAS A&M AGRILIFE

EXTENSION SERVICE

13105 NORTHWEST FREEWAY, SUITE 1000

HOUSTON, TX 77040

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. 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>

MG In-person Volunteer Gardening Opportunities

Learning Tuesdays at Centennial Gardens

As a reminder, every Tuesday, we will have a 30-minute lesson on a component of the garden for MGs and Interns. So you can get in an hour and a half of volunteer work and 30 minutes (sometimes more!) of continuing education. The workday begins at 9 a.m. We'll take a break mid-morning for a rest and the 30 minute class, then should finish up by 11 a.m. Email Becky Larkin directly, if you are interested in attending at rebeccalarkin117@gmail.com

Genoa Friendship Garden

1210 Genoa Red Bluff Road, Houston 77034

Weekday Workdays 8:30am - 12pm

Every Monday and Wednesday we are working in the gardens. Feel free to drop in to get service hours!

Weekend Workdays 8:00am - 12:00pm

Please join us every 2nd and 4th Saturday at our Weekend Workdays. These are opportunities for Interns and MGs to meet with other gardeners to learn and work in a variety of gardens while observing safe physical distancing.

Gardening on the North side at Christ the Good Shepherd Church (CGS)

Monday, Tuesday and Saturday - 8:00 -10:00 a.m.
CGS garden is located between TX 249 and I-45 just north of FM 1960 at 18511 Klein Church Rd, Spring, TX 77379.

All work tools and equipment are provided, including gloves, water, sunscreen, and bug spray. We welcome new faces to join our group. Contact **Dale Hudson** by phone or text at 832-659-7799, or email at UTVOL66@gmail.com.

The garden has 28 raised beds for vegetables and two uniquely designed raised beds for herbs. There is a heated greenhouse where veggies and herbs are started from seed. And, there is a specifically designed composting area where all of the compost and mulch requirements for the garden are met on site. Gardeners with special skills or interests can focus on a particular area and lead or learn in the setting they enjoy. CGS garden is approved as a Texas AgriLife research site, and as such we conduct plant trials throughout the year.

Would you like to contribute to the Urban Dirt?

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