

Urban Dirt

Composting!

Gardening Events and Information for Texans

The Breakdown on Compost

Article and photos by Terri Simon, Master Gardener

Do you know the difference between compost and mulch? Compost is organic material that has decayed and can be mixed in with soil to enhance plant growth and add nutrients to the soil. This material won't change the soil's texture but it can change the soil's organic matter. Compost added to sandy soil will help retain water but has the opposite effect on clay soil. When compost is mixed with clay soil it helps with drainage. Mulch is a material used to cover soil and it has several uses. Mulch can help insulate plant roots, increase water retention, decrease weeds and keep soil temperatures consistent. In some instances compost has been used as mulch. Some gardeners sprinkle an inch or two of compost in their plant beds. This "top dressing" then serves as mulch.



Compost and mulch mounds



Compost is available in bulk by the cubic yard, in packaged bags and can be home made. Another method for home made compost is called vermiculture. Worms are used in vermicomposting and the end product is worm compost. One huge

Bagged compost

advantage for making your own compost is that you know exactly what is in your compost. No poisons, no insecticides or other harmful substances were used in the production.

If you purchase your compost as I do, please do your homework. There are several types of compost and you need to determine which compost will benefit the type of plants you have and how much compost you need. One word of warning: if you have an HOA (Home Owner's Association) be careful ordering a truckload of soil, compost, gravel, etc. HOAs will require that the truckload of whatever that is in your yard be dealt with

cont'd on pg. 4



Upcoming Events	2	Master Gardeners in the City	12
Herb of the Month	3	Houston Native Milkweeds	13
Plant of the Month	5	Getting Down to Earth	14
2022 Plant Sale Schedule!	6	MG of the Month	18
A Pendant for Perennials	7	Ask a Master Gardener	19
March Gardening Calendar	8	GFG Garden Workdays	20
Growing With Plants and Nature	9	Master Gardener Birthdays	21
2022 Home Grown Lecture Series	10	Gardening Tools	22
2022 Green Thumb Lectures	11	MG In-Person Gardening Opportunities	23



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

UPCOMING EVENTS

MARCH 2022

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. 7, 10:00 - 11:30 a.m. For the HCC program, register in advance to receive the link: hccs.edu/community-learning-workshops

Mar. 15, 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

Educational Programs

Mar. 1, First Tuesday 11:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m. Meeting via Zoom. The Zoom meeting link will be posted in the Weekly Update.

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: homegrown2022.eventbrite.com/

Mar. 3, 10:00 a.m. - *Tomatoes for the Patio* by Brandi Keller, Texas A&M AgriLife Harris County Extension Agent – Horticulture

Youth Activities

Growing with Plants & Nature

Look for the Growing with Plants and Nature table at following plant sale and farmer’s markets:

Mar. 16 “Spring Break at Woodchase Park,” 10:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m., 3951 Woodchase Dr., Houston, TX 77042 - *Hands on planting and educational activities for children attending this Westchase District community event.*

Mar. 19 & 21 Genoa Friendship Gardens Tomato Plant Sale, 9:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m., and Open Garden Day 8:30 - 11:00 a.m, 1210 Genoa Red Bluff Rd., Houston, TX 77034
Grab and go activity for families with children.

Mar. 19 Towne Lake Farmer’s Market, 9955 Barker Cypress Rd., Cypress TX 77433 9:30 a.m - 1:30 p.m. *Hands on planting activity for children.*

Mar. 26 & 27 Berry Center Home and Outside Living Show, 8877 Barker Cypress Rd., Cypress, TX 77433 - *Hands on activity and grab and go options for children and parents attending the show.*

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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:



Texas AgriLife Extension Service
Horticulture Program in Harris County
13105 Northwest Freeway, Suite 1000
Houston, TX 77040
713.274.0950

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HERB OF THE MONTH

Saffron (*Crocus sativus*)

by Karen McGowan, Master Gardener

How would you like to save \$5000 a year? Unless you own a Latin restaurant, it's not likely that you fall within this particular demographic, but if you were to use a pound of the herb saffron in one year, that is potentially how much you could save by growing it yourself. Saffron is a beautiful member of the Crocus family that is well worth considering for the discriminating culinary gardener. A perennial spicy herb, *Crocus sativus* is well known as "Red Gold" in producing countries. This plant is the most expensive cultivated herb in the world, with a retail cost of \$30 per ounce.

The origin of the word saffron is the French term *Safran*, which was derived from the Latin word *safranum* and comes from the Arabic word *asfar* that means "yellow." A native of southern

Europe and Asia, the saffron crocus is unique among the 75 other crocus species. Its formal name of *Crocus sativus* is derived from the Latin meaning "cultivated." In fact, it has a lengthy history of cultivation dating all the way back to its use by Egyptian physicians in 1600 BC for medicinal purposes. Saffron has long been one of the most expensive food products in the world, largely due to the difficulty of its harvesting process. Saffron crocus blooms in the fall over the course of three weeks, which is when the saffron crocus harvesting commences. When it's time to pick saffron, harvesting saffron growers may work up to 19-hour days to carefully reap the blooms and then extract the few stigmas, which are then dried over heat and packaged for sale to international markets. To create a single pound of saffron requires a staggering 75,000 flowers yielding 225,000 stigmas!

The dried stigmas of the plant are used to produce saffron as a well-known spice, with the stigmas having further uses in pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, perfumery, and textile dye-producing industries. The world's annual saffron production is estimated around 300 tons per year, with Iran producing 76% of this total. Saffron

is also grown in Spain, Portugal, France and India, producing fragrant lilac-colored flowers about 2 inches (5 cm.) long. Despite its pleasant aroma and lovely bloom, the part of the plant that is most desirable is the three burnt-orange female organs, called stigmas, which become the resulting spice.



Saffron stigmas

Areas ideal for cultivation of saffron crocus average a low 15-18 inches (38-45 cm.) of annual rainfall. If you live in an area of significant precipitation, heavy rains are likely to damage the delicate flowers. However, beyond this environmental requirement, saffron crocus are relatively easy to grow and multiply fairly rapidly. Notably for the interested gardener, it would take about 150 to 200 bulbs to keep the average family supplied with enough

saffron. Plant the saffron bulbs about 2 inches (5 cm.) deep just as you would any crocus. Hardy through winter temps of down to -15 F. (-26 C.) but sensitive to soggy soil, water the saffron crocus sparingly, every two weeks, to prevent rotting, then await the latter part of September and asi! You will have an entire winter of Spanish Paella and Arroz con Pollo! A maintenance note: The plants should also be dug up and separated every three to four years.

While southeast Texas' annual rainfall averages may not prove ideal for growing *Crocus sativus* and beginning your Texan saffron empire, I do hope you enjoyed learning about this beautiful, exclusive herb. Happy spring gardening, y'all!



Crocus blooms

Citations:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3731881/>

<https://www.gardeningknowhow.com/edible/herbs/saffron/saffron-harvesting-information.htm>

The Breakdown on Compost, cont'd from pg. 1

quickly. Invite your friends and pass out shovels. Refreshments will help.

There are four basic types of compost but there are several sub categories. Several commercial suppliers may have their own compost blends available. There are organic, multi-purpose, manure and peat mixture composts on the market. There is also a mushroom compost as well.

- *Organic* compost can be purchased commercially. Different suppliers will have their own mix.
- *Multi-purpose* compost can serve as a broad spectrum fertilizer and can have different ingredients mixed in different percentages. Read the label.
- *Manure* uses animal wastes. It does smell and should be mixed with sawdust or wood shavings. Allow it to age before using it. If applied too soon it will burn up your plants. Do your homework before using.
- *Peat* retains water. Some plants do best in a peat mixture of soil.

Mushroom compost is also a type of organic compost. It is actually the substrate used in growing mushrooms. It has a high salt content and can kill some seedlings. The late Guy Lazarus, a Master Gardener at the Harris County Genoa Friendship Gardens, always wanted mushroom compost for his tomato plants.

One thing I have learned about the commercial organic mulch is that it can vary considerably between manufacturers. Previously, I used one cheap brand but I noticed it had numerous small sticks and branches in it. The new brand I use has fewer sticks. I feel I am getting my money's worth.

By the way, here's a bit of trivia for you. Did you know the first full weekend in May is designated as *International Compost Awareness* week?

For more information on composting, please check out one of HCMGA's free Green Thumb lectures (<https://harris.agrilife.org/2019/11/19/2022-green-thumb-lecture-series/>.) Master Gardener Carlos Domenech, considered Genoa Friendship Garden's *Compost Whisperer*, will present these March lectures on composting.

Test Your Compost Knowledge!

How well do you know compost?

1. Compost can be used as mulch. **True** or **False**?
2. International Compost Awareness Week is celebrated during the first full weekend in May. **True** or **False**?
3. Vermiculture uses worms to make compost. **True** or **False**?

Answers at bottom of page

Compost Knowledge Test answers: 1. True, 2. True, 3. True

PLANT OF THE MONTH

The Beauty of Brugmansia

Article and photos by Becky Lowicki, Master Gardener

“Angels Trumpet” heralds the first signs of spring like no other. With the most striking color palette and delicate petals forming a floral trumpet as a beacon of all things beautiful in nature, it’s hardly feasible that a bloom with such striking beauty even exists in our mere mortal midst.

Along statuesque stalks that can stretch upwards of 8 feet or more, lily-like floral pods almost seemingly overnight produce a colorful burst of an angelic pendulous array sounding the symphony of a sight to behold in your own backyard.

Brugmansia suaveolens, et al (*Brugmansia*), a sun-loving semi-evergreen tropical shrub or small tree of the Solanaceae, or nightshades, family, makes an excellent accent to the landscape or as a large container patio plant, this show-stopper does well in hardiness zones 9-11, perfect for the Houston humidity and heat of summer. With each bout of rain, magically a profusion of blossoms appear as an unexpected “thank you” if grown within organically rich, medium moisture, well-drained soils.

Similar but not the same, brugmansias should not be confused with *Daturas*, a short-lived, herbaceous perennial with smaller upright flowers.

There is also great diversity in brugmansia flowers which may range from 6-24” long in a variety of stunning colors, including pink, peach,

white, yellow, gold and peach, among others. Blooming performance depends on light, pH, temperature, nutrition and humidity—all favorable for the Houston tropics.

Potential pests on the watch list include caterpillars, white flies and red spider mites. Fair warning, all parts of this plant are toxic if ingested and sap may be an irritant.

The genus honors Sebald Justin Brugmans (1763-1819), a Dutch botanist, physician and professor of natural history, chemistry and medicine at Leiden University, Netherlands, who served as a General Inspector of the French Imperial Military Health Service and was devoted to the improvement of hospital

and barrack facilities and army conditions, combating epidemic conditions.

Check out this easy-to-grow favorite and discover your own bounty of beauty.



Brugmansia also known as *Angels Trumpets*



2022 HCMGA Plant Sale Schedule!

SOUTHEAST SALE

Genoa Friendship Garden
1210 Genoa Red Bluff
Houston 77034

February 19th & 21st
Tomato Sale

March 19th & 21st
Fruit Tree Sale

April 16 & 18th
Spring Vegetables &
Peppers Sale

May 14 & 16th
Perennials & Herb Sale



Online & in-person sales!
Sales will be posted separately
on the shop page. Pick up for
each sale is the Saturday date.

NORTHWEST SALE

Weekley Park
19110 Longenbaugh
Cypress 77433

February 19th & 21st
Fruit Tree & Tomato Sale

April 9th
Spring Perennial,
Veggie & Herb Sale

In-person only!



HARRIS COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS

2022 PLANT SALES

6 Sales - 2 Locations
Including activities for families!

For more information go to:
hcmga.tamu.edu/plant-sales/

Times for all sales - 9am-1pm
or until supplies last.



Southeast Sale ONLY: Order online for the best selections, hand chosen by Master Gardeners. Pick up paid orders on the Saturday date. In person shopping will also be available for Saturday and Monday of each sale. Monday is our Open Garden Day; tours of our demonstration gardens and plant trials will be provided along with plant sales.

Individuals with disabilities who require an auxiliary aid, service, or accommodation in order to participate are encouraged to contact the County Extension Office prior to the sale to determine how reasonable accommodations can be made.

The 2022 Fruit Tree listings are now available on our website!

<https://hcmga.tamu.edu/plant-sales/>

A PENCHANT FOR PERENNIALS

Mystic Spires Blue Salvia (Salvia longispicata x farinacea)

by Cindy Barger, Master Gardener

If you tell me that the local nursery has just received a new shipment of salvia, I'm there. I never want to pass up an opportunity to add another of what I believe is the "perfect plant" to my yard.

Do you want a plant that provides color throughout possibly three seasons of the year? Salvia. How about a plant that attracts butterflies, bees, and even hummingbirds? Salvia. Need tall plants? Salvia. Short plants? Salvia. There seems to be a salvia for every possible gardening need, and with well over 700 varieties the choices are plentiful!

Even though it is so hard to pick a favorite, I can confidently say that Mystic Spires Blue Salvia is one at the top of my list. This plant was added to the Texas Superstar® list in 2018. To be considered a Superstar, a plant must grow well for both growers and consumers, must be easy to propagate (meaning it will be readily available and therefore offered at an affordable price), and of course must be attractive. This colorful salvia definitely checks all the boxes.

Here are a few specifics of this beauty:

Mystic Spires is a compact form of the equally attractive Indigo Spires. While it is indeed smaller in stature than Indigo Spires, it flowers more during the growing season, producing masses of bluish purple flowers that will mix well with annuals and other perennials.

This salvia has a hardiness plant zone of 7-10 and likes full sun. (The one in my yard does not get direct sun but does exceedingly well. In my opinion it is a showstopper.) In our region it is considered a herbaceous perennial.

Mystic Spires tolerates heat and humidity and is not bothered by pests or disease. Too much water and fertilizer may lead to a lack of flowers and also excessive vegetative growth. This salvia will eventually shed dead petals, but feel free to deadhead or trim spent blooms as well. This plant can be pruned, if needed, during the growing season and will flower again quickly.

While the plant's height can be expected to be 18-30 inches, don't be surprised if your salvia greatly exceeds this general guideline. Two to three feet in both height and width, or more, is

not out of the question, despite being a "compact" salvia. Mine has reached over three feet in height at times and seems to spread easily. (At times I have braced up some of the taller branches so they don't fall over and break.)

The leaves are very attractive in and of themselves, a dark green color that truly complements the beautiful and vibrant blooms. I don't often take such notice of leaves on my perennials, but I find these to be unusually attractive.

This salvia adapts to moist soils but does prefer good drainage. This hardy perennial can be planted from spring through the early fall. During last year's Winter Storm Uri my Mystic Spires looked very beat up, and it appeared that I had lost one of my favorite plants. However, we cut it back in early March and this hardy Superstar returned for another year of fabulous blooms.

If you want your Mystic Spires to be a container plant, just be mindful that you will need to prune it often if you want to keep it within the confines of your container. The general nature of this plant is not tidy and upright; it grows tall, loose, and airy and looks very playful swaying in a breeze. Mine is in a flower bed, and I enjoy bringing in cuttings during the months it is blooming profusely.

Speaking of cuttings, this salvia seems to root easily. Last spring I noticed that

the wind (could have been a squirrel) had broken one of the taller branches. I snapped it off and dug a small hole with my hand and planted it right then and there. And to my delight the cutting never faltered; it soon grew and produced flowers. This is obviously not a scientific "Gardening 101" planting method, but it is an example of how easy this salvia is to propagate.

To sum up, this plant is dependable, heat-tolerant, adaptable, and stunning. It is indeed a superstar in any garden.

And with all that being said, I feel a trip to the nursery coming on. I am just sure I have a spot for one more Mystic Spires.





March Gardening Calendar

by Karen Shook, Master Gardener

One of the advantages of living in Harris County is the year-round opportunity to spend time in our gardens. But there is something special about spring that pulls us outside and makes us want to get our hands in the soil.

There is nothing like the first hot day of spring when the gardener stops wondering if it's too soon to plant the dahlias and starts wondering if it's too late. Even the most beautiful weather will not allay the gardener's

Perennials and Ornamental Grasses

- Finish dividing fall and summer blooming perennials and grasses.
- Get transplants in the ground.
- Fertilize established perennials and ornamental grasses.
- Cut back brown ornamental grass foliage.

Annuals

- If you are a bit jealous seeing cool season annual beds in full bloom and regretting that you didn't plant in the fall, consider buying some well-established (4" pots) plants. If you did plant in the fall, deadhead old blooms to keep beds looking fresh.
- Warm season annuals can be started from seed or transplants.
- Fertilize new plants to give them a strong start and fertilize established plants to give them a boost.

Bulbs

- Plant gladiolus (and other summer flowering bulbs). Plant gladiolus bulbs every 2 weeks from Jan through May for successive blooms.
- Remove fading flowers and developing seed pods on your spring blooming bulbs.
- Provide a light application of fertilizer for spring blooming bulbs showing active growth.

Roses

- Fertilize monthly, with first feeding after the spring pruning.
- Once you see new growth, it is time to start your weekly fungicide spray program.

notion (well-founded, actually) that he is somehow too late, too soon, or that he has too much stuff going on or not enough. – Henry Mitchell, 1923-1993

While you are out enjoying spring in the garden, keep an eye out for slugs and snails making their appearance and keep up with the weeding. As always, check for “too wet, too dry, just right” and water accordingly. The average temperature in March is mid to low 60's deg F and typical rainfall is 3.5 in.

Shrubs

- Fertilize established shrubs every 6 to 8 weeks. (3:1:2 or 4:1:2 are good choices).
- Prune (if needed) and fertilize azaleas after blooming is complete.

Lawns

- Lay sod as needed in bare areas.
- Mowing and bagging can help discourage weeds.

Ground Cover

- Finish up ground cover plantings to get them established before summer heat is with us.
- Fertilize established ground covers. If they are looking ragged, it is late, but not too late, to trim.

Vines

- Most woody vines bloom in the spring; don't prune until after bloom.

Edibles (vegetables, herbs, berries, fruits)

- See the following link for recommended plantings: Harris County Vegetable Planting Dates guide: [Harris County Vegetable Garden Planting Guide](#)

Trees

- Fertilize young, but established trees this month when you see new growth. Well established, older trees generally don't need extra fertilization.
- Fertilize crape myrtles in early spring and again in early summer.

Citations:

A Garden Book for Houston. 2nd ed., River Oaks Garden Club, Houston, Tx 1968.
Groom, Dale, and Dan Gill. Texas Gardener's Handbook. Cool Springs Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2012.
Richter, Robert. Month-by-Month Gardening Texas. Cool Springs Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2014.

Growing with Plants and Nature

Growing with Plants and Nature offers children and their families opportunities for learning about gardening and nature. We have returned to in-person programs outdoors while maintaining our virtual presence and making our virtual programs available to a broader audience.

Check out our Facebook Group at www.facebook.com/groups/GPNVG where you will find videos of all of our Family Zoom presentations as well as many crafts and activities related to those presentations. Email ogd.harrishort@gmail.com for any questions, information or comments about all of our Growing with Plants and Nature activities.

The Growing with Plants and Nature team expanded our presence into a new Houston neighborhood beginning this year. We have agreed to add twice monthly gardening and nature activities to an after school program provided by Friends of Northside, an organization seeking to bring more resources into the neighborhood.



We kicked off this exciting opportunity with information about microgreens and followed up with each student planting a tray to take home. Another session focused on understanding what seeds need to grow and the stages of growth.



To encourage the children to follow the growth of the bean seeds they planted to take home, each received a colorful “My Seed Journal”. Most recently, the students learned more about what a plant needs as it grows by “bumping up” a tomato seedling to take home.



Our team continued its traditional presence at the Northwest Weekley Park Plant Sale and the Genoa Friendship Gardens sale. We gathered as a group to put together a total of more than 300 “Grab and Grow” bags with all of the supplies the children of customers needed to grow a marigold plant.



Also, we began to make plans for returning to work alongside the Ask A Master Gardener team at the Towne Lake Farmer’s Market.



2022 HOME GROWN LECTURE SERIES

Lectures will be presented on the first Thursday of each month on Microsoft Teams and include live demonstrations. Register now so you don't miss one!

Winter

STARTING PLANTS FROM SEEDS

Paul Winski - Texas A&M AgriLife Harris County Extension Agent-Horticulture

January 6, 2022 - 10:00 a.m.

BASIC GRAFTING TECHNIQUES

Shannon Dietz - Texas A&M AgriLife Harris County Extension Agent-Agriculture and Natural Resources

February 3, 2022 - 10:00 a.m.

TOMATOES FOR THE PATIO

Brandi Keller - Texas A&M AgriLife County Extension Agent-Horticulture

March 3, 2022 - 10:00 a.m.

Summer

IDENTIFYING PEST & DISEASE ISSUES IN THE GARDEN

Paul Winski - Texas A&M AgriLife Harris County Extension Agent-Horticulture

July 7, 2022 - 10:00 a.m.

SAFETY IN THE HOME GARDEN

Shannon Dietz - Texas A&M AgriLife Harris County Extension Agent-Agriculture and Natural Resources

August 4, 2022 - 10:00 a.m.

ALL ABOUT MINT

Brandi Keller - Texas A&M AgriLife County Extension Agent-Horticulture

September 1, 2022 - 10:00 a.m.

Spring

STARTING PLANTS FROM CUTTINGS

Paul Winski - Texas A&M AgriLife Harris County Extension Agent-Horticulture

April 7, 2022 - 10:00 a.m.

HOME BUTCHER: MAKING BOUDIN

Shannon Dietz - Texas A&M AgriLife Harris County Extension Agent-Agriculture and Natural Resources

May 5, 2022 - 10:00 a.m.

10 REASONS FOR YELLOWING LEAVES

Brandi Keller - Texas A&M AgriLife County Extension Agent-Horticulture

June 2, 2022 - 10:00 a.m.

Fall

PROPER PRUNING IN THE LANDSCAPE

Paul Winski - Texas A&M AgriLife Harris County Extension Agent-Horticulture

October 6, 2022 - 10:00 a.m.

HOLIDAY MEATS - NOT JUST TURKEY!

Shannon Dietz - Texas A&M AgriLife Harris County Extension Agent-Agriculture and Natural Resources

November 3, 2022 - 10:00 a.m.

PLANTABLE CHRISTMAS TREE ALTERNATIVES

Brandi Keller - Texas A&M AgriLife County Extension Agent-Horticulture

December 1, 2022 - 10:00 a.m.

Registration



homegrown2022.eventbrite.com



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..

Green Thumb 2022 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**
Got questions? Go to hcmga.tamu.edu/ask-a-question/

Second Monday, 10:00 A.M. – 11:30 A.M. Houston Community College @Home Gardening Series

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

- | | |
|---|---|
| January 10 – Gardening in Small Spaces | June 13 – Gardening Open Forum |
| February 14 – Spring Vegetable Gardening | July 11 – Fall Vegetable Gardening |
| March 7 – Composting | August 8 – Herbs 101 |
| April 11 – Water Conservation | September 12 – Plant Propagation |
| May 9 – Succulents | October 10 – Citrus Trees |

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

No reservation required – facebook.com/harriscountypublib/events/
Third Tuesday of each month

- | | |
|---|---|
| January 18 – Gardening in Small Spaces | June 21 – Gardening Open Forum |
| February 15 – Spring Vegetable Gardening | July 19 – Fall Vegetable Gardening |
| March 15 – Composting | August 16 – Herbs 101 |
| April 19 – Water Conservation | September 20 – Plant Propagation |
| May 17 – Succulents | October 18 – Citrus Trees |



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

The Harris County Master Gardeners maintain the vegetable, herb, berry, and citrus beds in the Family Garden on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, so if you see one of us working there, feel free to say hi. We look forward to our formal in-person programming resuming soon. Please check back periodically for those dates.

**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.

Houston Native Milkweeds

by Linda Pearson, Master Gardener

Any butterfly enthusiast that lives in Houston is familiar with monarchs and their larval food, milkweed, *Asclepias*. There are 200 species of milkweed found around the world. Thirty of these milkweeds are found in Texas. The easiest milkweed to find in Houston is tropical milkweed, *Asclepias curassavica*, which is not native to Texas and has become a controversial milkweed choice. I have had success with some of the native milkweeds and would like to convince you to try some of these in place of tropical milkweed.

Asclepias incarnata, swamp milkweed, is a great choice if you have a sunny area that doesn't dry out. *Incarnata* thrives in moist soil. It even likes mucky, clay soils and will tolerate standing water. It doesn't bloom often in Houston, and it does tend to get rust late in the summer, but the caterpillars have never complained. It goes dormant in the winter and is one of the first milkweeds to start its new growth in the spring.

Asclepias perennis, aquatic milkweed, is another milkweed that prefers moist soil and will even survive periodic flooding. It is a Houston native with white flowers that is found on low, swampy ground. It grows in full sun, if it is watered adequately, to part shade. I have found *perennis* easy to grow from seed. *Perennis* does not have a taproot which makes it suitable for containers. This is the one native milkweed that I have that does not go dormant during a normal Houston winter.



Aquatic milkweed

There are several native milkweeds that enjoy sunny, dry areas. *Asclepias oenotheroides*, sidecluster or zizotes milkweed, and *Asclepias viridis*, green milkweed, are both Houston natives with taproots that make them drought tolerant once established. They both have pale green flowers. *Zizotes* is easy to grow while *viridis* is more challenging to get established. Once established *viridis* is a wonderful milkweed to have. Both of these milkweeds go dormant in the winter. *Viridis* also goes dormant

during the hottest and driest part of Houston summers, but it has a growth spurt and even flowers again in the fall.

Asclepias tuberosa, butterfly milkweed, is a Texas native that grows in poor soil. It prefers full sun and has a taproot that makes it drought tolerant. This milkweed may take a couple of years to get established but with its bright reddish orange flowers it is a showstopper. *Tuberosa* does not have the milky sap that other milkweeds have, but monarchs still use it as a larval food. It also goes dormant in the winter and puts on new growth late in the spring.



Zizotes milkweed

Asclepias verticillata, whorled milkweed, has a reputation for being easy to grow. I have less experience with it than with some



Bee enjoying green milkweed

other milkweeds. It has very narrow leaves and stems that can blend in with grass and be overlooked when the white flowers are not in bloom. It prefers full sun but will tolerate part shade. *Verticillata* is drought resistant and needs well drained soil. It can form colonies from underground rhizomes but is not considered invasive. This

is a late blooming milkweed and is the last of the natives to go dormant for the winter.

I hope you have found something you will be willing to try this spring. We sold several species out of the greenhouse at GFG last year and hope to do so again this year. Keep an eye on the online store and maybe you can pick up one of these home-grown milkweeds.

Getting Down to Earth

Article and photos by Pam Longley, Master Gardener

News from Genoa Friendship Gardens

Paul Winski, our county extension agent, came by the garden on Monday, February 14 and we unearthed our ginger trial. The tops of the plants had died back, the sign the tubers would be ready to harvest. None of us had ever grown ginger and it was a delight to see bright gold bundles come up weighing over a pound each! We had grown a 30 foot row and also planted ginger in several pots to see what the difference might be. We used little pieces of ginger from the grocery store as our starts. What we noticed was that the pot-grown ginger had more tentacle-like roots than the in-ground ginger.



Paul Winski, Carolyn Boyd, Patricia Metzinger and Evan Hopkins



Above, harvested fresh ginger root; at right, washed roots weighing in at 1.6 pounds

Here is a recipe for crystallized ginger, which can be eaten with champagne, cake or espresso and rolled in hazelnuts or macadamia nuts. It can be chopped to use a garnish for pastries or pumpkin pies. Medicinally, I have used it for motion sickness and nausea.

Crystallized Ginger

Ingredients

10 oz. fresh, young ginger root, peeled
2 cups white sugar
1 T. water

Instructions

Cut the ginger into 2-inch pieces and slice lengthwise into 1/8 -inch slices. Score ginger slices by pricking with a fork. Toss ginger with sugar in a bowl. Combine ginger-sugar mixture and water in a large skillet or wok; bring to a simmer. Reduce heat and cook, stirring occasionally, until sugar melts into a syrup and starts to crystallize, about 1 hour. Continue stirring until syrup is mostly crystallized and ginger comes together in a pile in the center of the skillet and very little syrup drains out; remove from heat. Toss ginger slices gently to cool and separate from excess sugar. Spread slices out on a tray to cool and dry.



Rick Castagno, vegetable production manager, reported that 880 pounds of produce was harvested in 2021, most of which was donated to the Heights Interfaith Ministries Pantry. We plan to put the following seed in for Spring/Summer 2022: Cabbage, tomatoes, crowder peas, Tatume squash (resists squash borers), carrots, white potatoes, cucumbers, melons, spinach, peppers, and radishes.

cont'd on pg. 15

Getting Down to Earth, *cont'd from pg. 14*

Genoa Friendship Gardens

Some of you may remember the big orange tree near the front gate at GFG. It succumbed to the February 2021 winter storm. We are talking about replacing it with a Palo Verde. If you have been to Centennial Gardens, this is the tree that is planted around the parking lot by the Cherie Flores Pavilion. It has a green trunk and papery yellow flowers. Truly show-stopping when it is in full bloom. The Palo Verde tree, also known as Jerusalem-thorn (*Parkinsonia aculeata*) is deciduous and a Texas native. For more information: <http://texastreeid.tamu.edu/content/TreeDetails/?id=68&t=P>



Palo Verde tree bloom

97381779 © publicdomainstockphotos|Dreamstime.com

MG Robin Yates introduced us to a native ground cover called Lyreleaf Sage (*Salvia lyrata*) that he will be planting in the Native garden. It is a perennial herb that usually grows wild in woodlands, meadows, fields and along roadsides. It can be grown in USDA hardiness zones 5 through 10 and tolerates partial shade but full sunlight brings out the best color. It is also relatively drought-tolerant.

Hummingbirds and butterflies love the tubular lavender flowers. The leaves deepen from deep green or burgundy in spring to turn red in autumn. The leaves can be used in salads or dried and brewed into tea as it has a slightly minty flavor. Medicinally it is said to soothe coughs, colds and sore throats.



Lyreleafsage in bloom

cont'd on pg. 16

Getting Down to Earth, *cont'd from pg. 15*

Article and photos by Dale Hudson, Master Gardener

Christ the Good Shepherd Garden - Spring, TX

This is the month of the year when gardeners may give different answers to the question How Is Your Garden Doing???. The HCMGA interns and other recent volunteers may look around and not see a lot going on. There are a few cold weather crops like onions, turnips, kale and collards that are green and growing and providing a harvest each week for the food pantries, but not a lot of other activity. The more “seasoned” gardeners however see this quiet time of the year as a period of renewal.



Most importantly, the greenhouse is a buzz of activity where every square inch of available space on a heating mat is taken up with a 50-pak of seedlings. Tomatoes were first. They went into the soil shortly after the first of the new year. Soon after came the peppers. Most recently the focus has turned to herbs like parsley and basil.

Tomato plants in the CGS Greenhouse are ready for transplanting.



The Texas AgriLife strawberry trial beds survived the February cold weather just as designed.

This is the time of year when activity picks up on the “behind the scenes” aspects of gardening. For example, we put out the welcome mat for the martins who are already scouting out places to make their summer home and raise their families. Unfortunately we must evict the sparrows who moved into the houses when the martins left for the warmth of Central America last Fall. No worries, the sparrows still hang around but the martins work harder all summer to keep the flying pests under control in the garden.

Additionally, though not so glamorous, is the very important task of producing compost. We believe, and are unabashedly famous for telling everyone, that the secret to our excellent vegetable production year after year is the quality of our soil. We produce all of our own compost for our raised beds and our herb beds, and this is the time of the year when we build up inventory for application prior to planting in the Spring.

Lastly, the “old-timers” recognize this is the pause in the

action that is best used to repair the irrigation system, clean and repair and replace the hand tools we use, and replenish inventories of gardening materials and supplies. Experience has taught us that we soon will be happy to have a new pair of gloves, a can of wasp spray, a squirt bottle of mosquito repellent, and oh yes, a handy band-aid for an owie or a blister.

Hello Spring of 2022...at CGS Garden we are ready for you!!!



Garden volunteer Ken Bache readies the martin houses for the new tenants..

cont'd on pg. 17

Getting Down to Earth, *cont'd from pg. 16*

Article and photos by Nancy Graml, Master Gardener

McGovern Centennial Gardens Family Garden

Learning Tuesday

Many Master Gardener interns are taking advantage McGovern Centennial Family Garden's convenient central location (with easy, free parking) to learn our gardening techniques first-hand. Master Gardener Will Isbell held an informal "Learning Tuesday" session with interns on fertilizer application and tomato planting procedure.

Will realized he needed to have a "pow wow" with interns first, about why we apply fish emulsion in addition to Microlife pellets and the correct watering sequence when we plant. Applying fish emulsion to new plantings gives them a burst of nitrogen--the most commonly deficient macro-nutrient in garden soil. Fish emulsion goes on the soil around transplants at the time of planting. As legumes fix nitrogen, gardeners should avoid applying this type of fertilizer to plants in that family. For our purpose, we want a fish emulsion product that shows nitrogen as the highest number followed by very low phosphorus and potassium numbers. Avoid washing out the fish emulsion by watering the plant before spraying the fish emulsion on the soil. While we apply Microlife before planting, its nutrients are not immediately bioavailable--meaning the nutrients are not yet in a form that is useable by the seedlings. Microlife needs microbial activity to facilitate the bioavailability of its nutrients to the plant, a process that takes at least 10-14 days.

In the interim, we don't want our plant sitting there hungry. We want them to immediately start a nice leafy growth to support a larger plant,



MG Will Isbell demonstrates to Interns on Learning Tuesday

so that is the reason we apply fish emulsion after watering. It is almost impossible to burn the plants with this type of fertilizer, though we should still read and follow the manufacturer's instructions.

Will continued by demonstrating the "trench" system for transplanting tomatoes. Horizontal planting can make the plants establish more quickly and is especially useful when dealing with leggy tomato transplants. Roots will form along the buried portion of the stem, giving better growth and less chance of plant injury from a stem that is too weak. Most productivity has to happen before the night time temperature exceeds 72 degrees. By drawing a diagram in the sand, Will explained how to avoid a common mistake of not watering where the root mass is located in the trench. He recommends placing a small stake in the soil above the buried root mass. <https://garden.org/learn/articles/view/360/> shows a diagram of the trench system.

Helping the Public Learn about Gardening

The spectacular gardens at McGovern Centennial Gardens are a magnet for visitors who wander into the Family Garden, see our Master Gardeners at work, and want to learn more. Our presence in the McGovern Centennial Family Garden helps us fulfill our mission of providing research-based information to help the public learn about gardening and horticulture. For example, Intern Lisa Rodriguez and Master Gardener Philip John recently had the opportunity to answer questions from a group of visitors about what we do in the garden and to provide literature



Intern Lisa Rodriguez and MG Philip John educate visitors

about the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service.



Lettuce harvest donated to local food pantry

MG of the Month - *Lisa Rodriguez*

by Karen Breneman, Master Gardener

Congratulations **Lisa Rodriguez!**

Lisa considers herself a native Houstonian, having lived here since the age of three. She retired from the Harris County district courts after twenty-five years of service as an executive administrative assistant. Lisa, an avid learner and lover of all things botanical, decided to pursue her Master Gardener's certification in 2020. So eager was she to begin, that she used vacation time to complete the once-a-week online classes during the last months of her employment.



Lisa with her husband, Alex

She married her husband Alex in 1996.

They share a passion for gardening and have spent over twenty-two years cultivating their small yard, creating a tropical paradise for their four cats. They also share a love of travel and have been fortunate enough to see many parts of the world. Some of their favorites include Hong Kong, several cities in Spain, Italy, Costa Rica, Hawaii, and Cuba. Lisa's favorite trip was to New Zealand

Lisa's lush tropical backyard paradise



because of all the natural beauty the country has to offer. Lisa and Alex also enjoy running. Lisa has completed 2 marathons, the first in 2000 and the last in 2019, with many half marathons in between.

The McGovern Centennial Family Garden captured Lisa's heart the first time she set foot in it, and when she met Becky Larkin, she knew she'd come home. She loves learning from the long-time volunteers in the Family Garden, and from its organizer, Will Isbell. She enjoys sharing knowledge of the garden's plantings with its visitors as much as working in the garden, and is grateful for the time she spends here.

Lisa always looks forward to her days in the garden, as well as to taking advantage of the many master gardener volunteer opportunities available, as she grows with the program.

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.

Ask a Master Gardener – In-Person Activities

by Valerie Depew, Master Gardener

Our Farmer’s Market table hosting activities have resumed. These events are in compliance with COVID protocols, such as wearing masks and social distancing.

For Harris County MGS interested in volunteering please see the SignUp link: <https://signup.com/go/wBSYeQe>

Additional dates for 2022 have been added. so be sure to check the SignUp link. If you do not see an opening where you wish to serve, please contact Valerie Depew at vdep56@gmail.com. We will work hard to accommodate those situations!

The full AAMG schedule for March

- Sat., Mar. 5** **Mercer Botanic Gardens**, 22306 Aldine Westfield Rd, Humble, 77338 – 10 a.m. to 12 p.m.
Urban Harvest, 3401 Westheimer, Houston, 77042 – 7:30 a.m. to 12 p.m.
Tomball Farmer’s Market, 205 West Main St., Tomball, 77375 – 8:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.
- Thurs., Mar. 17** **Westchase Farmer’s Market**, 10503 Westheimer Rd., Houston, 77042 – 3 to 7 p.m.
- Sat., Mar. 19** **Mercer Botanic Gardens**, 22306 Aldine Westfield Rd, Humble, 77338 – 10 a.m. to 12 p.m.
Towne Lake Farmer’s Market, 9955 Barker Cypress Rd., Cypress, 77433 – 9:30 a.m to 1:30 p.m.
- Sat., Mar. 26** **Memorial Villages Farmer’s Market**, 10840 Beinhorn Rd., Houston, 77024 – 8:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.

EVENTS

- Fri., Mar. 4 & Sun. Mar. 6** **Azalea Trail** - River Oaks Garden Club, Forum of Civics building, 2503 Westheimer Rd., Houston 77098
- Mon., Mar .21** **Genoa Friendship Gardens Open Garden Day** - 1210 Genoa Red Bluff Rd., Houston 77034
- Sat., Mar. 26 & Sun. Mar. 27** **CyFair Home and Garden Show** - Berry Center, 8877 Barker Cypress Rd., Cypress, TX 77433

Thank you to all of the hardworking volunteers who have been able to get back out there with the public events!

The Home Grown podcast is presented by the Agriculture & Natural Resources (ANR) Unit of the Harris County Texas A&M AgriLife Extension office. The series provides information on urban agriculture / horticulture / gardening and ag literacy. The program focuses on topics that are relevant to the urban gardener.

<https://bit.ly/3w4cUAR>



*The podcast can also be found at the following site:
www.listennotes.com/podcasts/home-grown-podcast-paul-OM7PKqityX_/*

For Harris County Master Gardeners Only!

March 12th & 26th GFG Workday!

8:30 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 Gardens 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 Gardens 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 **HAPPY BIRTHDAY** when you see them!

Lisa Bedford, Larry Brouwer, Karen Gorgol, Marsha Long Louise Hansen, Evan Hopkins, Parry Kahkeshani, Lisa Lawrence, John Moss, Jennifer Patterson, Linda Pearson, Joe Peddy, N Jean Robinson, 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 **Will Isbell** at mcg.harrishort@gmail.com, if you are interested in attending.

Genoa Friendship Garden

1210 Genoa Red Bluff Road, Houston 77034

Weekday Workdays 8:30 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.

Every Monday and Wednesday we are working in the variety of gardens. They include a large vegetable production garden and Texas AgriLife research plant trial beds. Feel free to drop in to get service hours!

Weekend Workdays 8:30 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.

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.

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

Monday, Thursday 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