

# Urban Dirt

Gardening Events and Information for Texans

## Purslane: Friend or Foe?

by Terri Simon, Master Gardener

Pull it, mow it, spray it with a pesticide? How do you handle purslane? Lately it has turned up in many of my planters. It's only shown up recently. I never had it before and I don't know where it came from. Did a bird bring me a gift or is it a pest that was hiding in the compost or mulch I recently used? According to [healthline.com](https://www.healthline.com), it's a healthy, leafy vegetable loaded with omega-3 fatty acids and antioxidants. As a skeptic I heard many of the same things about Goji berries and I hate the way they taste. I'm waiting for the next plant swap so I can dump the Goji berry. The scientific name for purslane is *Portulaca oleracea*. Other names for it are hogweed and pigweed. It's hardy and can grow almost anywhere.

Purslane can be eaten raw or cooked and is loaded with many nutrients. A 3.5 oz serving can give 35% of the daily value requirement (dv) of Vitamin C and 26% of the DV of Vitamin A. It has two types of omega-3 fatty acids and small



Purslane

amounts of calcium, magnesium, iron and phosphorus. Use it carefully because it has increased amounts of oxalates which can lead to kidney stones. It can be grown year long. Naturalized purslane can be found around the world since it grows in harsh conditions. It can have a bitter flavor but it's extremely nutritious. The plant can grow in zones 5 to 10. If you wish to propagate it, it can be divided or grown from seeds or cuttings. It likes full sun and can handle the heat. Mine thrived during the horrendous heat wave we had this summer. Purslane loves being next to a brick wall. I could easily take some to my next swap, but I know I would only wind up carrying it back home. Gardeners are a tough crowd. If you choose to eat some, please let me know

how it tastes. As for me, If I decide I need all of the nutrients it provides, it's available in capsule form in the drug/vitamin section of many large chain stores.

Upcoming Events .....	2	Women in Agriculture Conference .....	15
Graduating 2022 Class of MG Interns .....	3	Recipe of the Month .....	16
Native Plant of the Month .....	4	Master Gardeners in the City .....	17
Herb of the Month .....	4	Master Gardener of the Month .....	18
December Gardening Calendar .....	7	Genoa Friendship Gardens .....	19
Bug of the Month .....	8	GFG Garden Workdays .....	20
Getting Down to Earth .....	9	Master Gardener Birthdays .....	21
2024 Green Thumb Gardening Series .....	12	Gardening Tools .....	22
Ask a Master Gardener Online .....	13	MG In-Person Gardening Opportunities .....	23
Ask a Master Gardener In-Person .....	14		



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

## UPCOMING EVENTS - DECEMBER 2023

### Educational Programs

**Dec. 5**, First Tuesday 11 a.m. - 12:30 p.m. Program: *Is Beekeeping Problematic?* by Nicole Buegers from Bee2Bee Honey Collective. Meeting in-person at Trini Mendenhall Community Center, 1414 Wirt Road, Houston, TX 77055

### Public Gardening Lectures

**Dec. 5**, 2:00 p.m., *Fruit Trees* by Debra Caldwell, Glazier Senior Education Center, 16600 Pine Forest Lane, Houston 77084

**Dec. 9**, 11:00 a.m., *Container Gardening* by Teresa See, McGovern-Stella Link Regional Library, 7405 Stella Link, Houston, 77025

**Dec. 12**, 11:30 a.m., *A Few Perennials* by Teresa See, Weekley Community Center, 8440 Greenhouse Rd., Cypress 77433

### December Educational Event

**Dec. 8**, 8:30 a.m. -3:30 p.m., *Women In Agriculture Conference*, 2023 Fundraising Campaign for Urban Harvest, Inc., University Houston Downtown – Science and Technology Building. Register at: <https://give.urbanharvest.org/checkout/28862>

### AgriLife Extension Events

**Dec.12**, 11 a.m., *Pre-Freeze and Post-Freeze Landscape Care* by Brandi Keller, Harris County Extension Agent - Horticulture, Central Library, 500 McKinney, Houston 77002



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

CEA – Horticulture  
Brandi Keller - Brandi.Keller@ag.tamu.edu  
Master Gardener Volunteer Coordinator  
Stephanie Gray - stephanie.gray@ag.tamu.edu



### 2023 Board of Directors

#### President

Carolyn Boyd  
Carolyn.Boyd@hc-mga.org

#### First Vice President

Alexa Haass  
Alexa.Haass@hc-mga.org

#### Second Vice President

Kathryn McLeod  
Kathryn.McLeod@hc-mga.org

#### Past President

Jonathan Correia  
Jonathan.Correia@hc-mga.org

#### Secretary

Mary Stokman  
Mary.Stokman@hc-mga.org

#### Treasurer

Danny Dunn  
Danny.Dunn@hc-mga.org

#### Directors

Douglas McLeod  
Lucia Hansen  
Marsha VanHorn  
Fatma Ozel  
Jarvis Taylor

#### Assistant Treasurers

Cindy Moore, Marsha VanHorn

### Genoa Friendship Gardens

#### Steering Committee Advisors

Vacant

#### Urban Dirt Editor

Carolyn Boyd  
UrbanDirt.harrishort@gmail.com

#### Assistant Urban Dirt Editor

Terri Simon

#### Editor's note

*This is my last edition as editor of the Urban Dirt. I have thoroughly enjoyed working with an excellent team of Harris County Master Gardeners over the last nine years.*

*A new team of very talented MGs are taking the reins of publishing this newsletter and will continue to bring research-based horticultural information to our readers to create beautiful, productive gardens.*

*Happy Holidays!*

*Carolyn Boyd, Master Gardener*

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



# Graduating Class of 2022 MG Interns

by Carolyn Boyd, Master Gardener

The 2022 Harris County Master Gardener class graduated on November 16, 2023. They enjoyed a catered luncheon to celebrate the event. Having completed 70 hours of classwork and 60 volunteer service hour requirements Horticulture Extension

agents Brandi Keller and Stephanie Gray presented the twenty-eight newly minted Certified Master Gardeners with graduation certificates. Congratulations to all!



2022 Master Gardener Graduates

Photo by Tony Ruppe

## *Master Gardener Class of 2022*

Marcella Cabrera  
Terri Cole  
Evelyn Dravis  
Catherine Flowers  
Lynetta Freeman  
Marie Gandy  
Lynn Goodson  
Matthew Hagy  
Karen Hayes  
Roxanne Hoye

Pam Jackson  
Ana Jaramillo  
Bruce Johnson  
Fiona Kilbride  
Jamie Kingsbury  
Lisa Lee  
Pamela Lemire  
Stephanie McIntyre  
Deborah Maly  
Mary Montgomery

Jeff Pratt  
Olina Raney  
Rhonda Terracini  
Cheryl Tucker  
Anu Wadivkar  
Ronald Wheeler  
Patrick Whipple  
Rita Whipple

## NATIVE PLANT OF THE MONTH

# Leave the Leaves, Y'all!

Article and photos by Robin Yates, Master Gardener

When most of us think of gardening for pollinators, we think of springtime wildflowers with all their vivid colors, warm sunshine and a gentle breeze blowing across our gardens. Providing food and shelter for our butterflies, moths, bees, flies, dragonflies, and wasps during the growing season certainly involves planning and planting nectar producing and larval host plants. But did you ever wonder where the little critters go when the plants are dead or dormant? We call it 'the dead of winter,' but all is not dead! Growing up, I thought of dirt as dead, ground up rock dust. I was shocked to learn that soil is a thriving community of living organisms! Similarly, the fallen leaves, seedheads, hollow stems, downed branches and soil are home to many critters during this seemingly silent period. I suggest that we enlarge our concept of pollinator gardening to include leaf litter and brush piles.

This time of year, as the cold fronts reach southeast Texas, the trees give up the leaves they have been utilizing for photosynthesis and enter a period of dormancy. Our typical urban landscaping involves blowing or raking the leaves together, placing them in plastic bags, putting them on the curbside, and sending them to a landfill. This is not a sustainable practice, yet we have resigned ourselves to this norm. Leaves sent to a landfill do not decompose into compost. They go through anaerobic decomposition and produce methane, a more potent greenhouse gas than the carbon dioxide our cars and trucks produce. I suggest keeping the leaves in your yard for the many benefits they can provide. What benefits, you ask?

Use the leaves you would normally discard as mulch for your beds. Instead of bagging and sending them away, gather



Robin's truck loaded up with leaves from his neighborhood

them by raking or blowing, and relocate them to your beds. Raking is great exercise, yet if you blow, use an electric blower as it causes less air and noise pollution. Three to five inches of leaves to cover any open soil will become what I call nature's blanket. It will protect the plants' roots by providing warmth during freezes, cool them from the summer heat, suppress weeds, minimize moisture evaporation, decreasing supplemental watering



The demonstration brush pile with leaf litter at GFG

needs, and become nutrition for the soil food web as they break down over time! Those trees spent the entire growing season developing those leaves, and a lot of what they will require next year is locked up in them. Putting them back where they are needed only makes sense and saves you from having to buy as much fertilizer, compost, and mulch. As the leaves break down, they become Soil Organic Compounds (SOC), improving soil texture, mineral content, microbial diversity, water retention, water infiltration, plant available nutrients, carbon sequestration, and decreasing compaction. Be careful when adding any mulch and don't cover your plants or bunch the leaf mulch up against the plants. Leave the stems and trunks exposed to the air.

Did you ever notice how a forest floor often has minimal undergrowth? Nature has its own weed prevention strategy-fallen leaves! The leaves block the sunlight and air from the soil surface, effectively preventing many weeds from growing. Another use for your leaves could be to cover a walkway that becomes muddy when it rains. The leaf mulch will prevent you from bringing mud into the house.

*cont'd on pg. 5*



## Leave the Leaves, Y'all!, *cont'd from pg.4*

If you have too many leaves to use as mulch, then consider making larger and more beds! Millions of acres of our land are dedicated to turfgrass, and we each can do our part for nature by decreasing our lawn size and adding beds. How about starting with letting the leaves fall to the base of the tree and possibly adding more to create a bed beneath the tree? Planting native understory and shade tolerant groundcover will attract and support more wildlife, including pollinators. Small steps by all of us can make a huge difference in the long run.

Another alternative to bagging and hauling away is to compost the extra leaves. Composting can decrease our need for landfills, as over 30% of our food waste winds up in landfills. Leaves can be the major carbon or 'brown' portion of your compost pile. I gather leaves from the curbside all winter long and use them for compost. This way I never have to worry about having too many 'green' or nitrogen sources from my kitchen. I always have an ample supply of leaves to balance my compost pile. I liken my supply of leaves to the carbon in the filter of an aquarium. They neutralize the odor of the decaying materials while combining with oxygen from turning the pile occasionally.

Another use for the leaves is wildlife habitat. We spend a lot of time and energy keeping our yards looking neat and tidy. I would like to make another suggestion, that we reserve a portion of our yard for the overwintering pollinators. What do I mean? Many insects spend the dormant season of winter in leaf litter and brush piles. Many enter a state of diapause and overwinter in a natural setting, such as leaf litter and brush. Consider taking a small area of your property that is not frequented by people, say the back corner of the yard, behind the garage, between several trees and shrubs. Set aside an area for wildlife habitat. Instead of ripping everything out and sending it to a landfill, cut the dormant and dead stems leaving six inches or so, as the hollow stems provide nesting sites for native bees. The layers of leaves will be a cozy winter home for numerous invertebrates. Many critters find a home in the soil and appreciate a layer of leaves to protect them from the cold.

Remember the Black Cherry, *Prunus serotina* ([https://www.wildflower.org/plants/result.php?id\\_plant=PRSE2](https://www.wildflower.org/plants/result.php?id_plant=PRSE2)) we planted



*Native groundcover and understory, leaf litter, all great pollinator habitat.*

at GFG this year in memory of Georgia Lau? It is the larval host plant for the Tiger Swallowtail butterfly (<https://www.butterfliesandmoths.org/species/Papilio-glaucus>). Where does that critter spend the winter? In the pupal stage in the leaf litter, as does the Red-banded Hairstreak (<https://www.butterfliesandmoths.org/species/Calycopis-cecrops>). Whereas the Mourning Cloak, (<https://www.butterfliesandmoths.org/species/Nymphalis-antiopa>) shelters in leaf litter in the adult stage. It is often the last butterfly seen in the fall and among the first seen in the spring due to its lifecycle.

I hope that I have provoked your thoughts of how to further garden for pollinators by retaining the valuable leaves destined for a landfill and instead utilizing those leaves. Doing so will keep the planet a tiny bit cooler, but also benefit the wildlife, including our beloved pollinators that we depend on for so much joy. This can give our fall and winter gardening more purpose, knowing we are nurturing nature. I make that is a win-win for all! Please leave the leaves, y'all!

#### Resources:

<https://xerces.org/leave-the-leaves>  
<https://blog.nwf.org/2023/10/pro-tips-for-leaving-the-leaves/>  
<https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/earthkind/landscape/dont-bag-it/>  
<https://www.epicgardening.com/leave-fall-leaves/>

## HERB OF THE MONTH

# Cassia (*Cinnamomum cassia*)

by Karen McGowan, Master Gardener

Cassia isn't really an herb, I realize, but since this is my last herb article for *Urban Dirt* following eight years of monthly herb articles, please indulge me just this once. Cassia's common name "Chinese cinnamon tree" informs of cassia's massively popular product "cinnamon," a most popular kitchen item, particularly this time of year. The evergreen tree, grown outdoors in zones 10-12, is an excellent focus for December.



Cassia

The specific epithet *cassia* is a Latin term originating from the Greek *kasia* which itself originated from the Hebrew and Arameic *ketza* meaning "to cut". This is most likely in reference to the bark, which is stripped off during harvest. Peeled cassia bark is set aside to dry, and some varieties are scraped. As the bark dries, it curls into quills, with a color varying from light reddish brown to gray. The ground cassia is reddish brown in color; Chinese cassia is less aromatic than those grown in Vietnam and Indonesia, but cassia from all three of these countries has a sweet, aromatic and pungent flavor. Saigon cassia (you will notice it labeled as "Saigon Cinnamon" locally) is very highly esteemed. Yesterday while picking up some items for Thanksgiving, interestingly, I noticed while looking for it that Saigon cinnamon has become somewhat more elusive in the stores.

It is in southern Europe that formally labeled country-of-origin cassia is the preferred "cinnamon" in the kitchen, while in North America, we are rarely provided on cinnamon bottles the country source of the ground spice, which is used widely in cooking. From the *Lauraceae* family, cassia bark has a more pungent, less delicate flavor than typical cinnamon bark, and contains one to two percent oil of cassia, a volatile oil. Cassia's dried bark is used as one of the

five dried spices (including fennel, cloves, star anise, and Sichuan pepper) that comprise Chinese five-spice powder, a heady spice that provides amazing flavor to Asian dishes.

Best grown in evenly moist, well-drained soils in full sun to part shade, cassia is hardy only in tropical zones 10-12, and will not tolerate prolonged exposure to sub-freezing temperatures. If the ability to overwinter indoors as a houseplant is available, cassia can be grown in colder climates. However, since a mature cassia plant will reach up to sixty feet tall with a forty-foot canopy spread, the ability to overwinter indoors will be a quickly closing window.

Cassia's disease issues include being susceptible to root rot, "witches' broom," and various fungal leaf spots, while pest threats are thrips, mites, and leafhoppers, although both diseases and pests are more often a serious threat to young trees, in comparison to mature ones.

Kitchen uses for cassia are well-known and oft-used this time of year, particularly. Chinese cinnamon has a variety of traditional medicinal uses, as well, including the treatment of fevers, coughs, arthritis, and digestive diseases. The ancient east Indian medical system "Ayurveda" heavily utilizes cinnamon in both preventive and treatment medical usage. There are several references to cassia in the Bible, among them Psalm 45:8, which tells us that God's "garments are fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia! at God's "garments are fragrant with myrrh and aloes *and* cassia!



Dried *Cinnamomum cassia*

All, it has been a tremendous honor and pleasure to have been allowed the opportunity to research and write these eight years of articles for *Urban Dirt*, and to work with such an excellent team. As we close this year, I wish you and your family the most wonderful Christmas 2023 and year 2024. As we close this year, I wish you and your family the most wonderful Christmas 2023 and year 2024.

#### References:

<https://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/PlantFinder/PlantFinderDetails.aspx?taxonid=293355&isprofile=1&basic=cinnamomum#:~:text=Cinnamomum%20cassia%20%2D%20Plant%20Finder>

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/cassia-spice>





# December Gardening Calendar

by Karen Shook, Master Gardener

Our 2023 fall has been near historic average temperatures, but a little drier. The forecast shows near historic temperatures with a good chance of higher than historic precipitation. With cooler temperatures, supplemental watering is probably not needed, but check for “too wet, too dry, just right” and water accordingly. Keep up with mulch. A two-to-three-inch layer helps maintain soil temps and deter weeds.

## Perennials and Ornamental Grasses

- Cut back perennials that have finished blooming. Cutting back ornamental grasses can be done, but you might like the tan color, seed heads as a winter display.
- No fertilizer is needed at this time.

## Annuals

- Continue to plant cool weather annuals like snapdragons, pinks, poppies, calendula, stock, dianthus, alyssum.
- Fertilize only if plants are showing deficiency symptoms like pale or yellow leaves or stunted growth.

## Bulbs

- Finish planting early blossoming spring bulbs including tulips and hyacinths.
- Cut back foliage that has browned. Mark the location of dormant summer bulbs. It is also a good idea to mark where you plant spring bloomers so you don't accidentally dig them up or damage them digging in the vicinity. Check on the status of your stored bulbs.

## Shrubs and Trees

- Shrubs can be planted and/or moved giving them time to get established before summer heat.
- Most shrubs will be dormant and can be pruned late in the month. Avoid pruning shrubs that bloom in the spring.
- Keep azaleas roots moist in cold weather to avoid damage.

Continue gathering fallen leaves to use as mulch or as the “brown” in your compost. December is a good time for general garden clean up.

Reminder: First frost in Zone 8 is typically November 7 to November 28 and first frost in Zone 9 is typically November 25 to December 13. Be prepared to cover plants if needed.

## Lawns

- Gather fallen leaves so they don't shade your lawn. Or using a mulching mower, mulch them down into the lawn to help cover the soil surface and deter cool season weeds. Or gather them for mulch or composting.
- Unless you overseed with rye in the winter, not much is required for lawns in December. (Although I have a wood sorrel weed issue that I will likely choose to treat.)

## Vines and Groundcovers

- Early December is a good time to plant or divide and transplant hardy groundcovers so they can form strong roots and be ready to grow next spring.
- Plant hardy perennial vines through the winter months with December prime time. No fertilizing needed until spring

## Edibles (vegetables, herbs, berries, fruits)

- See the following link for recommended planting times: [\*Harris County Vegetable Planting Guide\*](#)

### 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.  
[Weather.gov/wrh/climate](http://Weather.gov/wrh/climate)

## 'BUG' OF THE MONTH

# Nematodes

by Debra Caldwell, *Advanced Master Gardener: Entomology*

Most gardeners have heard of nematodes but have only a vague idea of their true nature. Nematodes are invertebrates that belong to Phylum Nematoda, the roundworms. They are quite different from true 'bugs' and other arthropods as well as being very different from segmented worms like earthworms.

Nematodes are literally everywhere. There are over 25,000 identified species and as many as a million (or more) undiscovered nematode species. In 1914, Nathan A. Cobb, "the father of nematology in the United States" wrote,

*"If all the matter in the universe except the nematodes were swept away, our world would still be dimly recognizable, and if, ... we could then investigate it, ... mountains, hills, vales, rivers, lakes and oceans represented by a thin film of nematodes. The location of towns would be decipherable..."*



Kansas State Research and Extension CC BY 2.0 Deed

All nematodes look similar. They are long, thin and have tapered ends. Internally, they are relatively simple with a long, complete digestive tract. They don't have circulatory or respiratory systems, relying instead on simple diffusion. Most species have separate males and females. Much of the body cavity is filled with reproductive organs. Many are microscopic but some, like *Placentonema gigantissima*, discovered in the placenta of a sperm whale, is a whopping eight meters long!

Many nematodes are free living in soil or aquatic ecosystems. They often function as decomposers and help to recycle nutrients. Some nematodes are parasitic such as *Ascaris lumbricoides* which is a parasite of humans and pigs. Dog heartworms are nematodes as are *Trichinella* species which cause trichinosis.

Root Knot Nematodes, *Meloidogyne* species, are found on most types of plants. The little roundworms grow into roots, lay their eggs, and produce hormones that cause galls or 'knots' to form. Crop rotation or using resistant varieties are the best



Root Knot Nematodes

Photo by Scott Nelson

defenses against these pests. Letting the garden lie fallow, soil solarization, or sowing French marigolds have been shown to suppress nematodes. Removing roots from garden beds immediately after harvest and tilling the soil several times helps to reduce the number of nematodes. Nematicides, chemical pesticides, can be effective. A combination of methods often is necessary to control the little pests.

There are other types of nematodes that attack plants as well. In addition to roots, stems, leaves, bulbs, and seeds come under attack from various species. The microscopic worms move through the thin film of water on the surface of plants and are more active in wet conditions. If you suspect that your plants are infested by nematodes or have some other mysterious ailment, you can send samples to the [Texas Plant Disease Diagnostic Laboratory](https://plantdiseasehandbook.tamu.edu/problems-treatments/problems-affecting-multiple-crops/root-knot-nematodes/)

It's not all bad news because species of nematodes that act as insect parasites can be used to control certain insect pests. Some of the nematodes being developed as biological controls target turf insect pests and others that live in soil. For example, *Steinernema carpocapsae* tends to be most effective against caterpillar larvae and is used to control Squash Vine Borers.

Nematodes have existed for a billion years so we might as well get used to them. For more information about these interesting creatures check the references below.

#### References:

<https://plantdiseasehandbook.tamu.edu/problems-treatments/problems-affecting-multiple-crops/root-knot-nematodes/>  
<https://plantdiseasehandbook.tamu.edu/problems-treatments/problems-affecting-multiple-crops/nematodes-other-than-root-knot/>



# Getting Down to Earth

Article and photos by Pam Longley, Master Gardener

## News from Genoa Friendship Gardens

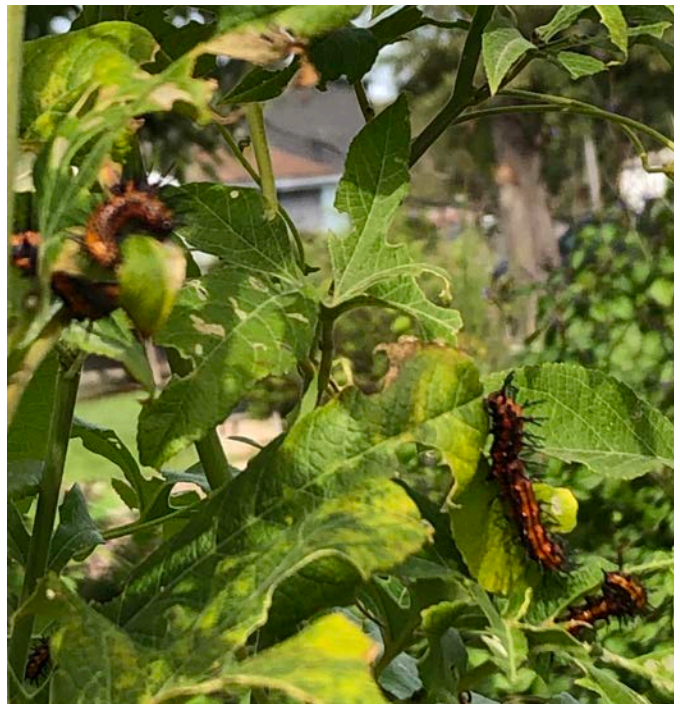
**Sandy Stevens**, our Cylinder Garden Queen, told me that she has stayed in contact with teacher, Sharon Juntanen, in Pasadena ISD after providing cylinders for her school for several years. Sharon reports that they have 13 cylinders for first graders and a 4 x 12 foot garden for fourth graders. She glues the seeds onto strips of napkins for easy and accurate planting. They are growing beans, radishes and snow peas and the children weed and water during recess. Sandy told a funny story about a taste test during lunchtime involving their garden-grown lettuce and some ranch dip. The cafeteria ladies complained of the interference and competition. So, the taste tests had to go to the classroom after that.

**Doug McCleod**, interns **Noah Ingram** and **Jacob Sweetland** and I make up the vegetable production team. We are growing a row of “Juliets” and “42s” tomatoes and they are beautiful, bursting with bloom sets! We also have over a dozen “Juliets” in the greenhouse and will harvest them from there. We wanted some insurance this season after our fantastic heirloom crop froze on the vine last year just before ripening.



“Juliet” tomatoes growing in the greenhouse

### Seen at GFG:



Julia butterfly larvae on host plant

cont'd on pg. 10



“Juliet” and “42” tomatoes



*Getting Down to Earth, cont'd from pg. 9*



*Asters in the Butterfly Garden*



*Gourds that will dry into loofahs*

To all: We loved having so many of you attend November's First Tuesday at GFG. See, it's not so far!!



*Coreopsis gone wild!*



*Sugar cane (remember when we chewed on this from the grocery store as kids?)*

*cont'd on pg. 11*



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

Article and photos by Dale Hudson, Master Gardener

**Christ the Good Shepherd Garden - Spring, TX**

This season of the year most gardeners are thinking about the fresh flowers and fresh vegetables decorating their holiday tables, and not so much about the beds and gardens from whence they came. Not to worry; there remain enough souls who enjoy the brisk morning temps and the walk through the glistening dew on the leaves to ensure the holiday kitchens are well supplied.

At the CGS garden we just completed the most popular and anticipated social event, the planting of the onions. Without fail, every year we gather as many volunteers as we can find and plant more than 1000 onion slips across eight beds. We adhere to the good advice of those who came before us, i.e. If It Ain't Broke Don't Fix It, and plant 500 1015Y Texas Super Sweet, and 500 Southern Belle Red slips. Like everything with gardening some years are better than others, but we've never had a bad year with these two familiar varieties.

At CGS we take pride in maintaining a full slate of production right through the winter and up to the spring transition to warm season crops. This year is no exception. In addition to the MG trials on carrots and strawberries, we have broccoli and cauliflower already looking good. We even have a couple of beds of fall tomatoes full of flowers and small fruit. Next on our schedule is more

carrots, beets, turnips, and a couple of beds of spinach and lettuce to make sure we all get our vitamins and minerals along with our turkey and dressing plus all the fixin's.

HAPPY AND SAFE HOLIDAYS TO ALL, AND BEST WISHES FOR THE COMING YEAR.



*Straight from Carrizo Springs, TX, 1000 onion slips, just arrived*



*The more the merrier when it's time to plant onion slips at CGS Garden*

The 2023 Green Thumb Gardening Series lectures have concluded. Below is the 2024 schedule to assist in your gardening plans for the coming year.

# Green Thumb 2024 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/](https://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: <https://hcc.idloom.events/gardening-series/register>

### Second Monday of each month

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| January 8 – <i>Intro to Aquaponics</i>              | June 10 – <i>Seed Saving and Starting</i>           |
| February 12 – <i>Success with Spring Vegetables</i> | July 8 – <i>Fall’s Best Vegetable Garden</i>        |
| March 18 – <i>Edible Landscaping</i>                | August 12 – <i>Growing Bulbs in Texas</i>           |
| April 8 – <i>Gardening in Containers</i>            | September 9 – <i>Heirloom and Pass-along Plants</i> |
| May 13 – <i>Identifying “Good and Bad” Bugs</i>     | October 14 – <i>Gardening for Extreme Weather</i>   |

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

No reservation required – [facebook.com/harriscountyppl/events/](https://facebook.com/harriscountyppl/events/)

### Third Tuesday of each month

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| January 16 – <i>Intro to Aquaponics</i>             | June 18 – <i>Seed Saving and Starting</i>            |
| February 20 – <i>Success with Spring Vegetables</i> | July 16 – <i>Fall’s Best Vegetable Garden</i>        |
| March 19 – <i>Edible Landscaping</i>                | August 20 – <i>Growing Bulbs in Texas</i>            |
| April 16 – <i>Gardening in Containers</i>           | September 17 – <i>Heirloom and Pass-along Plants</i> |
| May 21 – <i>Identifying “Good and Bad” Bugs</i>     | October 15 – <i>Gardening for Extreme Weather</i>    |



*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.*







# Ask A Master Gardener Online

by the AAMGO Committee

**Q:** Hello, are you able to tell me what's wrong with my Hibiscus? Thanks!



Hibiscus

**A:** Thank you for sending in your question about your braided hibiscus. I am sorry that it is not doing well. Often it is difficult to diagnose problems from photos. As with many cases of potted plants that are struggling, often the situation comes down to a watering issue. It is difficult to tell from the photo if anything else is going on with your plant, but it is not unusual to see watering issues after such a long, hot, dry summer.

In a typical situation, potted hibiscus like to stay evenly moist. They do not like to dry out for very long. This care guide, [Growing the Tropical Hibiscus in Louisiana](#), states: *Hibiscuses prefer an even supply of water and should not be allowed to wilt severely before watering. Those in containers are especially vulnerable to drying out and may need daily watering in the summer. Water*

*hibiscus plants growing in the ground regularly and thoroughly during hot, dry weather or whenever you notice they have wilted slightly.*

Yet, as with any plant, there is a fine line between not enough watering and too much watering--and the symptoms are usually the same. This is because a plant that is watered too much will look like one that has not been watered enough, with wilting leaves and sometimes yellowing leaves that eventually turn brown. Too much water saturates the roots to the point that they cannot uptake any oxygen, so they effectively drown. This article from the Texas A & M Agrilife Extension Service, [Chinese Hibiscus, \*Hibiscus Chinensis\*](#), has the following language around properly watering these plants in containers:

*To bloom and grow profusely, hibiscus must have sufficient water. As with most other plants, watering should be done thoroughly and not too frequently.*

I would encourage you to start using a moisture meter probe, or to use your finger to check the moisture levels in your potted plants. A moisture probe can extend down into the soil of the pot and give you a good reading around the roots. Alternatively, a screwdriver can perform the same function. Insert a long, flat headed screwdriver into the soil. If it goes in easily and comes out with some soil, the pot is wet enough. If it is difficult to insert the screwdriver, and if it appears to be completely dry at the bottom, then you may *need to water*. Since you are still learning how to judge how much to water, I would recommend the moisture meter first. It has a clear graph image of the moisture levels in your soil. Once you have practiced with it for a while you will be able to judge this much better.

I would like to add that it has been a very difficult summer for all of our plants, including those in containers. It is very easy to over-water when plants look wilted and sad, and yet that is often the cause of their demise. So while it is hard to tell precisely what is going on with your plant, it is more than likely a watering issue of some kind.

At this point I would try to assess the moisture levels in the soil, and then take your next steps based on what you find. I hope that your plant recovers!

*cont'd on pg.12*

If you are a Harris County MG, interested in volunteering for AAMG Online and want to be trained, please contact coordinator.harrishort@gmail.com.

# Ask a Master Gardener – In Person Activities

by Margie DiGiacomo, Master Gardener

Our Farmer's Market table hosting activities have resumed. Prospective volunteers and interns: if you see that an event is full and it is one that you would really like to attend, please reach out to Margie DiGiacomo so that we can add you to the volunteer

list. Please remember that we want to provide many opportunities for you to earn your hours and interact with the public!

The SignUp is available here: <https://signup.com/group/7369887112200440118>

## The full AAMG schedule for December

- Sat., Dec. 2**      **Mercer Botanic Gardens**, 22306 Aldine Westfield Rd., Humble, 77338 – 10 a.m. to 12 p.m.  
**Urban Harvest Farmers Market**, 2752 Buffalo Speedway, Houston, 77027 – 8 a.m. to 12 p.m.  
**Tomball Farmers Market**, 205 West Main St., Tomball, 77375 – 8:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.
- Thurs., Dec. 14**   **Westchase Farmer's Market**, 10503 Westheimer Rd., Houston, 77042 – 3 to 7 p.m.
- Sat., Dec. 23**      **Memorial Villages Farmers Market**, 10840 Beinhorn Rd., Houston, 77024 – 8:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.

## Ask a Master Gardener Online, *cont'd from pg. 11*

**Q:** I would like to plant Queen Palms on my property. Is that possible in Missouri City TX? I don't have a green thumb at all so I would really appreciate some guidance. Thanks in advance.

**A:** Thank you for your question. Queen palms are beautiful, but like many palms, they can be risky to grow in our area because of our occasional hard freezes. The publication, [\*Palms for North Florida\*](#), from the University of Florida about more cold-hardy palms for North Florida is very helpful for our area.

The hardiness zone for queen palms is 9a to 11, which makes them more tropical in nature; they're able to withstand temperatures down to about 23°. How well they handle the lower temperatures depends on the locations the queen palms are planted, the microclimate in your yard, how long the palm has been planted in your yard, and your ability to wrap them up or otherwise protect them from a hard freeze.

The tough part comes when we have temperatures that occasionally dip lower than 23°. My neighborhood is a couple of miles north of I-10, about a mile west of the tollway, and I have some neighbors that have lost their queen palms three different times after hard freezes over the last 20 years, even when the palms were planted near heated swimming pools. Many of my neighbors have given up on queen palms, but some like them enough to keep replanting them.

Winter Storm Uri in February 2021 was very hard on palms throughout our area and many different species died all

over town, including those planted further south near Galveston. Some palms died quickly, while others produced new growth and appeared to survive, until the internal rot from the frozen tissue progressed to the point where palm tops started falling. Date palms, Mexican and California fan palms, and queen palms were severely affected all over town. If you have your heart set on a queen palm, you might want to ask around in your neighborhood to see if anyone had queen palms before our last two hard freezes and then ask how they fared, just in case conditions in your neighborhood offered more protection for palms.

Palms that survived some of the coldest conditions across Houston in recent history, one of which might make a good alternative choice for you to consider, depending on your landscaping needs, include:

- Dwarf palmettos (*Sabal minor*)
- Florida sabals (*Sabal palmetto*)
- Texas / Mexican sabals (*Sabal mexicana*)
- Most windmill palms (*Trachycarpus fortunei*)
- Most European fan palms (*Chamaerops humilis*)

The Brazoria palmetto or Brazoria palm, (*Sabal x brazoriensis*) was also reported to tolerate Uri very well - they are considered a Texas native and are very slow growing; I'm not sure how commercially available they are.

I hope this gives you the information you need, and if you have any further questions, please contact us.





JOIN US DECEMBER 8, 2023 FOR OUR 2ND ANNUAL  
**WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE CONFERENCE**  
UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON DOWNTOWN



A FEW of the Focus Topics this year:

- Medicinal Herbs
- The Fresh Cut Flowers Business
- Urban Beekeeping
- Therapeutic Gardening
- What to Consider Before Purchasing Land
- Small Acreage Goat Farming

To Register Please Scan the QR Code  
OR  
Visit [www.urbanharvest.org](http://www.urbanharvest.org)



Limited scholarships are available.  
For more information, please contact  
Sharon Stinson at [education@urbanharvest.org](mailto:education@urbanharvest.org)

## Recipe of the Month

# Cranberry Chocolate Pecan Pie

Article and photos by Jo Ann Stevenson, Master Gardener

This month's recipe combines three ingredients that are all great desserts on their own, but when combined make a decadent dish for the holidays. It's that time of year for cranberries, pecans are abundantly in season, and who doesn't love chocolate any time of the year??? This combination checks all the boxes

– the tartness of cranberries, crunch of pecans and sweetness of chocolate. I hope you consider making this for your holiday table.

This recipe is originally from Let's Dish and can be found at <https://letsdishrecipes.com/cranberry-chocolate-pecan-pie/>.

### Cranberry Chocolate Pecan Pie

8 servings

Prep time: 30 minutes

Cook time: 45 minutes

Total time: 1 hour 15 minutes

#### Ingredients

- Pastry for single-crust pie (9 inches)
- 3 eggs
- 3/4 cup sugar
- 1/2 cup butter, melted
- 3 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 2 teaspoons vanilla
- 1 cup chopped pecans
- 1 1/2 cups fresh cranberries
- 1 1/4 cups semisweet chocolate chips (we used dark)

#### Instructions

1. On a lightly floured surface, roll pastry dough to a 1/8-inch thick circle. Transfer to a 9-inch pie plate. Trim pastry about 1/2-inch beyond rim of plate and flute edge. Refrigerate 30 minutes while oven preheats to 450 degrees. [Note: Substitute frozen pie shell, thawed, if you prefer.]
2. Prick the crust all over with the tines of a fork, then line with a double thickness of foil or parchment paper. Fill with pie weights, dried beans or uncooked rice.
3. Bake for 10-15 minutes, or until edges are light golden brown. Remove crust to a wire rack and remove the foil and weights. Reduce oven temperature to 350 degrees.
4. In a large bowl, beat eggs, sugar and melted butter until well blended. Whisk in the flour until smooth. Stir in the vanilla.
5. Stir in the pecans, cranberries and chocolate chips. Pour into crust.
6. Bake for 30-35 minutes or until top is bubbly and crust is golden brown. Cool to room temperature before serving. Refrigerate leftovers [if there are any!!].



Cranberry Chocolate Pecan Pie

#### Nutrition Facts

Amount per serving: 1 piece

523 calories, 35g total fat (15g saturated fat), 106mg cholesterol, 189mg sodium, 52g carbohydrate (39g sugar, 4g fiber), 6g protein.



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

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

McGovern Centennial Gardens at Hermann Park

1500 Hermann Drive

Houston, Texas 77004

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.

# MG of the Month - *Julie Blanchard*

by Karen Breneman, Master Gardener

**C**ongratulations! Julie grew up in a small town in Missouri. Her grandparents owned a farm where Julie was exposed to vegetable gardening and canning! That farm kept her



Julie Blanchard

family provided with farm fresh milk, butter, eggs, a freezer full of beef and pork and jars and jars of canned vegetables. Her grandmother's beautiful flower garden was well known in the area and provided flowers for many weddings and special events.

Julie moved to Texas where she met and married her husband, Randy, and raised three boys. She taught middle school in HISD and currently is the Office Manager for her husband's business, Structural Wood Components, and works part-time for her church, Grace Community Church in Spring Valley.

Once her children were grown and left the nest and Covid provided more time at home, she found time to enter the Harris County Master Gardening program and learn a great deal about gardening in Texas. Julie began investing her time and knowledge creating her own backyard oasis where she and her husband enjoy their down time watching birds, butterflies and bees make themselves at home. She began volunteering at Centennial Gardens where she met

Master Gardener, Marisol Arteaga, who introduced her to the Container Gardening program and its amazing team of volunteers who are dedicated to providing supplies and resources to Harris County educators to expose students of all ages to gardening. Julie is currently co-chairing the Container Gardening Committee.

"While my main objective was to develop my gardening knowledge, I had no idea how much fun I would have getting to know other Master Gardeners through volunteering and getting involved in HCMGA events."

## 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 a [kbreneman2017@gmail.com](mailto:kbreneman2017@gmail.com).

Thank you in advance for your nomination!

## Home Grown Podcast

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. The podcast can also be found at the following site:

[www.listennotes.com/podcasts/](http://www.listennotes.com/podcasts/)

[home-grown-podcast-paul-OM7PKqiyX/](https://home-grown-podcast-paul-OM7PKqiyX/)

Log on to listen to a recent interview with Master Gardener volunteer Rick Castagno. He shares his experiences at Houston demonstration gardens, and a few stories of what's been grown in the vegetable beds.

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





# Genoa Friendship Gardens



The Flower Trial Garden



The Water Garden



The Greenhouse

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

## The Genoa Friendship Gardens

located at

1210 Genoa Red Bluff Road  
Houston, Texas 77034

Weekly Garden Hours: Open all year round, Monday and Wednesday mornings, 9 a.m.-11a.m. (weather permitting).

We welcome professional organizations, schools, churches, and individuals tours of the garden! If interested in a tour, please email the HCMGA Program Coordinator at [coordinator.harrishort@gmail.com](mailto:coordinator.harrishort@gmail.com)

## Open Garden Days

are on the 3rd Monday of the month, **March through October**, 8:30 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.

Admission to the Exhibit Gardens is free, and register at the Welcome Table to receive additional monthly notices for children and family events.

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

## *For Harris County Master Gardeners Only!*



# GFG Workdays

Monday & Wednesdays

8:45 a.m. – Noon

1210 Genoa Red Bluff Road, Houston TX

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 garden leads will be on hand to guide you through the tasks.

For some of you who consider this a distance you can't commit to on a regular basis, you can drop in any time. You will see old and new friends!

Please join us at our GFG Garden Workdays!





# 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>

Our monthly newsletters are jam-packed with information. The *Urban Dirt* is now indexed by various gardening categories. Go to <https://hcmga.tamu.edu/urban-dirt-index/> to dig deeper into past *Urban Dirt* issues.

If you would like to receive new editions of the *Urban Dirt* newsletter each month, please add your name to the mailing list [HERE!](#)



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

Marisol Arteago, Debra Caldwell, Eileen Donovan, Ana Jamarillo, Dianne Lawrence, Becky Lowicki, Bennie Matusek, Karen McGowan and Janice Muhm

*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.

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

Average Last Freeze Dates (Hobby 2/8, Bush 3/1)      Average First Freeze Dates (Bush 11/30, Hobby 12/20)

Plants grown over winter may require protection during freezing weather.      Seeds and transplants started in the heat of summer will benefit from shading during establishment.





# TEXAS A&M AGRI LIFE EXTENSION

TEXAS A&M AGRI LIFE

EXTENSION SERVICE

13105 NORTHWEST FREEWAY, SUITE 1000

HOUSTON, TX 77040

713-274-0950

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

[hcmga.tamu.edu](http://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. You will avoid the need to track down planting guides and other gardening resources if you subscribe, and you can easily share information with others. This is definitely a timesaver for these busy garden days and helps promote our organization. Reach us via these links:



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

[www.facebook.com/HarrisCountyHorticulture](http://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](mailto: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 work in a variety of gardens. They include a large vegetable production garden, Texas AgriLife research plant trial beds, wildflower area, native plant landscape, Perennial and EarthKind gardens and the greenhouse. Feel free to drop in to earn service hours!

### 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](mailto: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](mailto:UrbanDirt.harrishort@gmail.com)**