Strengthening the Master Gardener Program: Goals for 2012

Daphne Richards
Strengthening the Master Gardener Program in Travis County: Goals for 2012

A native Central Texan (Lorena), Daphne has first-hand experience with a lot of Texas. After earning a B.A. degree in Botany from the University of Texas at Austin, she moved to South Texas to teach high school biology. After two years teaching ninth graders in La Joya, TX, she moved to College Station to acquire a Master of Science degree in Horticulture from Texas A&M. Upon graduation she traveled around Europe before returning to apply for a job with the Extension Service. She applied for positions in New Mexico and Utah, but, El Paso called her to the desert and a nine year role in the El Paso County Extension Office. As the El Paso County Extension Agent, Daphne built the Master Gardener program from 35 volunteers to over 100, and increased hours-volunteered from under 1000 to over 12,000. In El Paso the Master Gardeners had very large xeriscape and vegetable demonstration gardens at the local TAMU research station, gave monthly educational presentations and had an informational booth/farm stand at the local farmer’s market each week.

Master Gardener Meeting information:
Wednesday, January 4th, 2012 starting at 7 pm.
Zilker Botanical Garden

Master Gardeners and Daphne will have an opportunity to get to know each other better at an informal reception following the presentation.
Hello Master Gardeners:
A Message From Your President

As I write this note, it’s raining outside. After the terrible, hot, dry summer, I can’t and won’t, complain about the rain. It’s that slow gentle rain that feeds the soil where it lands. In September, many of us wondered if it would ever rain again – although intellectually, we knew it had to start some time, in our gardeners’ hearts we feared that Central Texas was doomed to forever suffer the unrelenting heat and drought. The December rains are welcomed by our landscapes and trees and have encouraged bluebonnets to germinate in anticipation of spring.

Recently, the Texas Forest Service (TFS) announced that Texas might lose as many as 500 million trees from the drought and heat. TFS estimates that another 1.5 million trees will die as a result of the unprecedented wildfires. We’re truly fortunate that the fearless firefighters and first responders were able to control and stop the wildfires; it could have been so much worse.

As we look to a new gardening season ahead, it will be important to build off what we learned from 2011. In our role as educators, we recommend the planting of drought resistant and adapted plants, and as gardeners, we need to heed our own advice. How fortuitous that the new Creating a Drought – Resistant Garden book was released just in time to help as we plan our new gardens. The first printing was quickly snatched by gardeners, and a second printing is ready for delivery to nurseries. What a wonderful resource for us as we develop plans for educational sessions during the next year. Many thanks to Anne Van Nest and all who helped write and edit the book.

In my garden, soon the dead plants will go to the compost heap, and many which limped through the drought may join them. I plan to be ruthless with those tropicaals that can’t handle the heat of Central Texas and are constantly thirsty. I spent too many hours pouring precious water into container plantings and intend to limit the number of containers in my 2012 garden.

My 2012 New Year wishes are for all to have beautiful gardens full of heat tolerant and drought resistant plants and, for TCMGA, a continued focus on providing relevant, timely information to the gardeners of Central Texas. They’ll be looking to Daphne and the rest us to give them the advice and strength to garden again.

Happy New Year!!

Jackie
A Message From Your President

2011 TCMGA AWARDS

**Lifetime Membership Awarded:**
(15 years of volunteer service)
Frankie Hart
Joy Ruth

**Garden Stars Award:**
Rebecca Matthews
Sue Nazar
Joe Posern
Sheryl Williams

**Certification of Excellence:**
Mary Lou Bell
Tommie Clayton
Reeve Hobbie
Paula Middleton
Ferne Mizell
Holly Plotner
Joe Posern
Marian Stasney

**President’s Special Recognition Award:**
Anne Van Ness

**Golden Glove Award:**
Link Davidson
Richard Moline

**Peggy Stewart Award:**
Elaine Dill
Eleanor Pratt
Despite a year of record heat and drought, 2011 came to a close with a stunning display of brilliant leaf color. As a nature lover I appreciate the lovely hues, but as a vegetable gardener and dedicated composter leaves ultimately give me visions of compost and mulch. As the leaves begin to fall and folks begin to rake, I begin my annual ‘leaf runs’, cruising the neighborhood and piling the stuffed bags into the back of my truck. (Sidenote: if you employ this method it is best to ask permission from the homeowner. I often stop when I see someone bagging leaves and ask if I can have them for use in my vegetable garden, and to date I have never received a negative response). I even have a deal with my next-door-neighbor who uses a mulching mower to ‘rake’ his leaves. To avoid the sometimes laborious process of filling bags, I lay out an large plastic tarp and he empties his leaves right on top. When it gets full - but not too full - I fold it over and drag it into my backyard. It gets emptied into a pile where it will later be used as mulch or layered into the compost pile, and the tarp gets laid out again for a refill. Leaves are a valuable source of organic matter and they are indispensible as we work towards more sustainable landscapes.

January is usually our coldest month here in Central Texas and the vegetable garden is fairly idle, but many of the preparations and planning for the spring gardening season can be started indoors, where it is cozy and warm. These activities include day-dreaming, of course, of the many vegetables you want to grow, determining what you actually have space for, and then putting a plan to paper.

In early January sow seeds of cole crops and greens in small pots filled with a sterile potting mix and place them under fluorescent grow lights. In about 5 weeks you will have transplants that will be ready for planting outside in the garden. Try quick-maturing varieties like ‘Green Magic’ or ‘Gypsy’ broccoli, ‘Gonzales’ or ‘Red Express’ cabbage or ‘Snow Crown’ cauliflower. All are available from Johnny’s Selected Seeds (www.johnnyseed.com). Most any variety of collards, mustard or other greens can be used since their leaves can be harvested at any size. Root crops like carrots, beets and turnips, as well as sugar snap, snow and garden peas can be seeded directly in the garden at the end of the month.

Even though most of us do not plant tomatoes until mid to late March, they can also be seeded early this month to grow indoors under grow lights and then bumped up to a larger container after 4 or 5 weeks, where they can grow until transplanting time. See the January/February issue of Texas Gardener magazine for Bill Adams’ favorite tomatoes from his 2011 trials.

If you are plagued by birds nibbling on your juicy ripe tomatoes, try using red Christmas ornaments as decoys. This is an old-fashioned method of deterring birds from pecking on tomatoes. Hang the ornaments among your plants just as your tomatoes start to show color and when the birds peck on those hard, red globes they will be shocked and disappointed and hopefully will go elsewhere in search of more tender, juicy tomatoes. If you don’t already have a stash of red ornaments you can get them during the post Christmas markdowns. I also pick up several of those large tree disposal bags as they are a convenient size for enveloping large pots or tomato cages when frosty weather threatens. A few inexpensive home-made and/or recycled garden supplies include row cover staples cut from coat hangers or garden labels made from repurposed plastic knives or lengths of discarded window blinds. And if you subscribe to the local newspaper save those plastic bags as their shape is perfect for storing long, thin vegetables like eggplant and cucumbers.
Set onions into the garden in mid to late January, planting transplants 1 inch deep and 2 inches apart. After a few weeks thin to every 4 inches and eat the thinnings as green onions. For optimum growth and development sidedress plants every 3 weeks with ½ cup of a nitrogen-rich fertilizer per 10 feet of row. Most varieties take 120-160 days mature, so don’t expect to harvest bulbs until May or June.

If you are looking for something new and different to grow, you might want to try one of the new All-American Selections for 2012, which should be available as transplants this spring. Below are the two winners in the edible category:

‘Cayennetta’: an easy to grow, compact, chili pepper that produces a heavy yield of mildly spicy, 3-4 inch tapered peppers that ripen from green to glossy red. Good specimen for small garden spaces or pots.

‘Faerie’: a small sized watermelon that has a creamy yellow rind with a crisp and sweet pink flesh. The compact vines produce 7-8” fruit that weigh about 4-6 pounds.

Happy New Year and I wish you much success in your gardening endeavors!
A NEW XERISCAPED FRONT YARD
by Bob Beyer

Following a devastatingly hot and dry summer, reality had set in, and we knew we had to make a dramatic change to our landscape in view of future forecasts of continuing drier and hotter than normal weather for years to come. So we designed an entirely new front yard landscape which removed all St. Augustine turf, and replaced it with native and adaptive perennials in hardwood mulched areas and a minimum of turf area using prairie buffalo grass. HOA guidelines had to be followed, and fortunately our HOA has proactively adopted xeriphytic landscaping guidelines and encourages this transformation.

We are not unlike most homeowners with a small residential lot who have a limited budget, so cost was indeed a consideration. Our approach to constructing this in a cost effective way was as follows:

1. Identify those tasks that are beyond our physical or technical capability, and contract that work. In our case that resulted in St. Augustine turf removal (done effectively with a strong weed eater), and some masonry work to expand a raised bed to match the house architecture.

2. Identify and stage materials needed. This mainly involved the purchasing of 4" steel bordering strips to outline turf vs. mulched areas, and to provide bordering along property lines to keep out neighbor’s St. Augustine grass.

3. Gather decorative limestone boulders and rock from construction sites when permissible or possible. You never know when or how these can be used in a garden landscape. We were able to use natural rock that we collected 5 years ago from building sites, which saved a lot.

4. Do construction work in planned phases, pacing the work so that as each step progresses you can better envision the outcome, and make any necessary adjustments during, rather than after, construction. In our case, the steps were grass removal, bordering, masonry and dry river bed building, sodding, mulching and stone pathways, and final perennial planting.

5. Order natural materials in bulk a day ahead of placement. We first ordered a palette of buffalo grass and laid it the next day, followed by hardwood mulch – also spread the next day. Any surplus materials were used elsewhere in the yard.

6. Any sod work requires loosening the soil, shaping and tampering the sod firmly, and watering daily for up to 3 weeks following, to ensure the grass has taken root. Our sodded areas are about 1/3rd of the total front yard area. Buffalo grass, when 3-4” tall will add a nice contrast to the mulched perennial beds. Seeding can only be done in spring, and that offers a great opportunity to try the new Habiturf mixture developed by the LBJ Wildflower Center.

7. Planting of perennials. We chose natives that will provide a variety of flowering colors and textures, using the City of Austin Grow Green book as our primary reference. Finding sources may be challenging at times, but local nurseries were able to order the plants they didn’t already have which met our needs. Our planting layout incorporated evergreen with deciduous plants in groupings.

8. The last step was the placement of decorative natural rocks and boulders to provide a natural look. These are the rocks we had collected and saved over time. We added some additional décor. Three décor pots of different sizes and coloring in a grouping.

9. The curbside strip, done earlier, was incorporated into the overall front yard landscape as well to give it a unified look and feel.

Now the final accounting. We were able to do all of this work in a weeks time (being retired), not counting the time developing the design and plan, and the total cost was below $2,000. Normally we wouldn’t consider spending even that much on landscaping, but we consider it an investment that will pay off time and time again as we enter a period of water restriction and continued unfavorable climate conditions. We will use much less water, have to do much less work to maintain it, and get to enjoy a variety of beautiful native/adaptive plants rather than just look at a solid green (or often dead looking) St. Augustine lawn.

We share this story with you because we feel many are reluctant to take this plunge for a variety of reasons. If we, in our late
A NEW XERISCAPED FRONT YARD

60's, on a fixed retirement income, can do it, so can you. The important thing is to realize that it is a good investment of time and resources that will provide years of benefit to you and your neighbors down the road. Our next step is to do the same to the back yard in spring 2012. The design has already been developed. So bye-bye St. Augustine grass. We won’t miss you! Drive by 15420 Whistling Straits in Avery Ranch to see for yourself. What we planted in fall will be getting established while going dormant until spring, but you will note that this landscape doesn’t have a ‘desert’ look which is a common misconception of xeriscaping. Xeriscape means using water saving plants of all types. Hopefully, you this will inspire you to go xeriphytic also. Be sure to get HOA approval if needed, and do your homework first.
How Horticultural Oil Works

by Wizzie Brown

Insects have small areas on the side of their body called spiracles which they use for breathing. The insect can open and close the spiracles to allow air into and out of the body.

Horticultural oils kill insects by suffocation through the oil coating the insects’ body and blocking the spiracles. Since the oil needs to coat the insect thoroughly for it to work properly, they must be applied when the insect is present. Horticultural oils can also kill eggs by penetrating the shell and interfering with respiration. When using horticultural oils, it is important to get good coverage.

There are two basic categories of oils - dormant and superior. Dormant oils evaporate more slowly and tend to stay on the plant longer than superior oils. Dormant oils should be utilized in times when plants are in a dormant state. Superior oils, also called summer oils, are lighter and stay a shorter period of time on the plant, so are less likely to cause plant damage.

Not all conditions are ideal for horticultural oils. They should not be used when it is about to rain or when an area will be irrigated as this will wash the oil from the plant. Grasses and similar plants have vertical surfaces that cause oil to run off more quickly and often require a higher application rate. Oils should be used in times of low humidity to reduce evaporation rates.

Horticultural oils work best when used against soft-bodied insects such as aphids, whiteflies, plant bugs, etc. Caution must be taken when utilizing horticultural oils because some oils may cause phytotoxicity (toxicity to plants). To avoid damaging the plant, make sure to read and follow all label instructions.
From Seeds to Transplants
Thursday, January 19, 2012
10:00 am - 12:00 pm
Travis County AgriLife Extension Office
1600 B Smith Rd.
Austin TX 78721

From Seeds to Transplants will help you understand which vegetable plants are good candidates to start from seeds to get a jump start on the growing season. Learn about seeds, growing material, lighting, temperature, air circulation and moisture requirements. The knowledge gained in this seminar will help ensure success for your vegetable garden.

This seminar is free and open to the public. It is presented by the Travis County Master Gardeners, a volunteer arm of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service in Travis County. www.tcmastergardeners.org. For information, call (512)854-9600.

Planting Spring Vegetables
Saturday, January 14, 2012
10:00 am - 12:00 pm
Zilker Botanical Garden, Garden Center
2220 Barton Springs Rd.
Austin, Texas 78746

Master Gardener Patty Leander is a frequent guest on public televisions’ Central Texas Gardener and speaker throughout the State of Texas. She will share her immense knowledge of planning and growing your own home vegetable garden. Patty will also address our recent drought conditions and it’s long term effects. Plant lists, seed sources and planting schedules will be provided for you to take home. Join us for this informative and visually stimulating presentation.

Parking and seating are limited so please register online to reserve your seat at http://travis-tx.tamu.edu/horticulture/ and click on “Public Seminar Registration”. This seminar is free; Zilker park entrance fee is $2 per adult, $1 per child or senior. The seminar is presented by the Travis County Master Gardeners, a volunteer arm of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service in Travis County. www.tcmastergardeners.org. For information, call (512)854-9600.
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Visit the websites: www.tcmastergardeners.org and http://travis-tx.tamu.edu

The End...

Time to Get Gardening!