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Texas Wildflowers - Betty Bird

We all have enjoyed the beautiful wildflowers this spring, thanks to the wonderful rains early this year. Our May speaker will help extend our wildflower season. Betty Bird, a sixth generation Texan, and member of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas, will talk about the recently republished book, Texas Wild Flowers by Eliza Griffin Johnston. Texas Wild Flowers is a series of 97 watercolors Ms. Johnston painted in the late 1840’s and early 1850’s while living in Austin. Joins us for an enjoyable evening of wildflowers, and maybe even a little surprise.

Master Gardener Meeting information:
Wednesday, May 2, 2012 starting at 7 pm.
Zilker Botanical Garden
Hello Master Gardeners:
A Message From Your President

This month, at the general meeting, Daphne will explain the requirement for all TCMGA members to have a criminal history review (check). This is a requirement coming down from TAMU Extension Services. Daphne also will distribute the forms which each of us is required to complete, sign and return to her. Just like most people, I’m not excited to ‘have someone looking around in my stuff.’ However, as volunteers working with children, people with disabilities, older folks, and the general public, we have a responsibility to ensure that those folks aren’t placed at risk.

Many institutions already require this type of review of their employees and volunteers if there’s any potential of working with members of the public, and especially with children. Hospitals, nursing facilities, and home health agencies have been obtaining this information on their staff for many years. In fact, many churches obtain these reviews on their congregation members who routinely work with others, as do schools and day care facilities. Volunteers who work with 4H have been required to participate in the criminal history review for a number of years. New TCMGA interns have gone through the process for several years as well. Now it’s time for those of us who have belonged to TCMGA for some time to participate in the review process.

If you’re not familiar with the process, names are submitted to the Texas Department of Public Safety for matching against criminal records. All of our names will be sent in together as a single batch. If there’s a match during the TDPS process, TAMU staff will handle any discrepancies. Should there be a potential issue, you have the right under state law to submit information to correct the records. So you don’t need to worry about any false hits.

As the reviews must be completed every three years, anyone whose last review was more than three years ago will also need to complete the form. Anyone who’s last review was less than three years ago will not need to complete the form this year. The cost of the reviews will be paid from TCMGA funds.

You may recall that our dues were increased last year specifically to pay for the reviews.

Because of our work with the public, I believe it’s the right thing to do. I hope you agree. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask Daphne.

With the quickly warming temperatures, be sure to stay safe as you’re gardening and enjoying the beautiful outdoors. I’ve already talked to a number of people who have had nasty encounters with poison ivy this year. Apparently they didn’t realize that like many perennials, much of the poison ivy didn’t go dormant this winter. The worst case I’ve seen was a man who contracted poison ivy all over his feet; he was having trouble walking around. And, the mosquitoes also seem to have gotten an early start this year. So be careful and safe!

As always, happy gardening to all.
Jackie
In The Vegetable Garden
by Patty Leander

If you plant it, they will come. I’m talking about squash and those pesky squash vine borers. Because of the mild winter, I took a chance this year and planted several squash seeds on February 27 - a few weeks earlier than normal. With no freezes and mild weather, the plants have been growing along quite happily, blooming and setting fruit, right up until mid-April, April 18 at 11:45 AM, to be exact. That’s when I encountered the first squash vine borer moth of the season - laying eggs all over my plants as if she had been holding them in until she arrived in my garden!

Her small brown eggs are laid singly, usually at the base of the plants, or along the stem. Once they hatch, a tiny, grub-like larva emerges and burrows into the stem. As the larva grows and eats, the stem is damaged in a way that it cannot support the flow of nutrients and water, causing the plant to wilt and eventually die. Squash plants often wilt in the heat of the afternoon. A healthy plant will recover by the next morning, but a plant infested with squash vine borer will stay wilted no matter how much water or shade it receives. Keep an eye out for this moth, and inspect your squash plants regularly. The orange and black moth flits around pretty fast, but with laser-like focus, and a little luck, she can be dispatched with a fly swatter or bug zapper. If you find eggs, promptly scrape them off of the squash stems with your finger or the edge of a knife.

Once the larva has entered the stem it is fairly well-protected, making it difficult to treat with insecticide. Some gardeners inject Bt into the stem with a syringe near the entry point, or you can slice the stem open with a sharp knife, remove the larva, and cover the wound with moist soil. Amazingly, most plants will recover and continue growing if the larva is removed before severe damage occurs.

Onions should be bulbing now in response to the longer days. As they reach maturity, their necks will begin to soften, and you should gradually withdraw water and allow the soil to dry. When they are fully mature, usually late May or early June, the tops will fall over, and they can be pulled. After harvest, prepare them for storage by spreading them in a dry spot to cure for 3-5 days. Go ahead and harvest any onions that send up a flower stalk. They are perfectly edible, but they will not store very well.
By now, potatoes should have plenty of foliage, and tubers will be forming underground. Some plants are so happy about the cooler temperatures we’ve had, that they may even produce pretty flowers. If you carefully dig around your plants later in the month, you can rob a few delicious new potatoes, but leave the plants in the ground until the tops begin to yellow so that the remaining tubers can reach full size.

Beans that were seeded in March will be flowering and setting pods this month. Inspect the foliage regularly for stippling on the leaves, a sure indication that spider mites have invaded. Treat for spider mites by alternately washing the leaves with a strong spray of water, and spraying with insecticidal soap every 5-7 days. Be sure to get the underside of the leaves, as that is where these pests reside. Some gardeners swear by a weekly spraying of liquid seaweed to keep spider mites at bay. This anecdotal method is not backed by university trials or research, but seaweed is known to have other benefits to the plants, so it may be worth a try.

Thanks to Clyde Adley for bringing those wonderful molokhia transplants to the plant exchange in April. If you snagged one let me know how you like it. Molokhia is a nutritious green that is very popular in the Middle East, and it seems to tolerate our Texas summers pretty well. To read more about molokhia and other heat-loving garden vegetables, check out my guest post on the 'Masters of Horticulture' blog, created by fellow Texas Gardener writer, Jay White (www.mastersofhort.com). Jay is a systems analyst at MD Anderson while also working on his Masters of Horticulture at Texas A&M. His blog contains a variety of interesting articles on horticulture related topics, including a recent post on tomatoes by Bill Adams.

And speaking of tomatoes, those green ones are looking pretty promising, aren’t they? Won’t be long now, and if you have already harvested red ripe tomatoes, then I salute you!
Genista Caterpillars
by Wizzy Brown

Now that the Mountain laurels are done blooming, do you still go up to take a closer look? If not, then you may be missing some insects. Genista caterpillars can be quite common on Mountain Laurel, but may also be found on crape myrtle and honeysuckle.

These caterpillars can grow up to one inch in length and are greenish-yellow to orange in color, with small black and white dots along their body (Figure 1). The caterpillars have hairs that emerge along the body, but hairs do not densely cover the body. Genista caterpillars create webbing similar to that of webworms. Larvae, or caterpillars, feed within the webbing causing defoliation of the plant. Eggs are laid in overlapping clusters on the underside of leaves. Pupation occurs in a small, white silken cocoon that is attached to plants or structures. There are two generations per year.

Management of outbreaks can be rather simple. If plant size allows, the caterpillars can be hand-picked from the plant, and either smashed or dropped in a bucket of soapy water. Other options may include insecticidal soap, horticultural oils, botanicals or Bacillus thuringiensis var. kurstaki, also known as Bt. Bacillus thuringiensis var. kurstaki specifically targets caterpillars, but will not distinguish between “good” and “bad” caterpillars, so be careful where you apply it, and also be aware of drift that may occur. When using Bt, good coverage of the plant foliage is essential, since the caterpillars need to consume a lethal dose. There are also numerous synthetic insecticides formulated to treat for caterpillars. When using any pesticide product, be sure to read and follow all label instructions.
Add Some Specimen Plants to Your Garden
by Bob Beyer

Specimen plant? What’s that? It is any plant that is really different, enough so as to catch the eye, and draw attention to its uniqueness. It’s one that stands out as if to tell the visitor to your garden, “bet you haven’t seen me before”. Now why would you want to plant that? Simply to add interest to your garden; just as you might do if you had something whimsical, or a unique piece of natural or manmade hardscaping.

There are so many possibilities for finding that unique or rare specimen plant, but the following criteria should first be considered. It should be a native or adaptive plant that will survive and grow well in our unique growing region. Often such a plant is a cultivar of a species that falls into the native and adaptive category. Secondly, you should know in advance where this “eye catcher” will be located in your garden, so as to compliment, not detract from the overall landscape composition. Often such plants will be on the expensive side, as they are not commonly grown for the nursery trade.

Some hardy specimen plants that I have had success with in my Austin garden over the past 5 years, and recommend, include the following:

Thuja occidentalis ‘filaformis’: This is a cultivar of Arborvitae with long drooping string-like foliage up to 12 inches long – definitely a weeper. The foliage acquires different winter coloration during cold weather. It is the focal point of our front yard landscape, which also features weeping yaupon holly. Arborvitae is adaptable to our area and is evergreen.

Ilex vomitoria ‘pendula’: A weeping form of Yaupon Holly that actually grows to small tree proportion. This female cultivar produces an abundance of red berries to compliment its unique, weeping growth habit, but needs space.

Ilex vomitoria ‘Will Fleming’ (male), and “Scarlet’s Peak (female) upright yaupon hollies: These cultivars are fastigiate (having erect and almost parallel branches tapering toward the top), and excellent for small garden space, or corner areas, taking up less than 4 sq. ft. Scarlet’s peak is a relatively new introduction that produces red berries in winter. The Will Fleming is a pollinator for it, along with any other nearby Yaupon.

Saphora secundifolia ‘silver peso’: Would you believe this a Texas mountain laurel with grey/silver pubescent foliage that produces the same grape-scented blooms we love in spring? This may be hard to find, but well worth the effort. It would be a feature specimen plant in any southwest type garden.
Add Some Specimen Plants to Your Garden

Cycas panzhiauensis: This cycad was a recent 20th century find in China, and is totally cold hardy in Central Texas. It has bluish green fronds that emanate from the base, and produces an attractive evergreen rosette. Give it space, as the fronds get to 3-4’ long.

Raphypidophyllum histrix: Known as the needle palm, since is produces black needle-like structures from the base, this evergreen palm is the most cold hardy in the world. It gets to around 4’ tall maximum, with a nice rosette spread. Fan leafed palms make great specimen plants, as they show well as the feature plant in any garden.

Silver-leafed Hardy Palms: This is a category of plants that includes all silver leafed forms of cold hardy palms, such as Nannorrhops ritchiana, Serenoa repens, Brahea armata, Trithrynax compestris, and Chamerops humilis var. cerifera, all of which offer a different eye catching look as a specimen plant.

Morus australis ‘unryu’ (tortuosa): This is a fast growing tree with twists and turns that are amazing. Its contorted shape amaze all during winter, and shows well when fully foliated with its large leaves. Give this plenty of room. As a vigorous grower, it may need some control pruning.

Some variegated plants that show off well as specimen plants include:

Hybiscus syriacus ‘American Irene Scott’: The boldly white marginal variegated foliage will draw attention to this plant, especially when double pink blooms adorn it as well in summer. Being deciduous, it will only “show off” spring to fall.

Eleagnus pungens ‘maculata’: There are several cultivars of variegated Eleagnus, but this cultivar is the most striking, and adds bright, contrasting color to your garden year round. It grows much slower than a non-variegated Eleagnus.

Yucca aloifolia ‘marginata’: This is a very colorful tall, slender, clumping Yucca known in the Southeast as “Spanish bayonet”. The streaked green to chartreuse to yellow variegation stands out. Keep away from children play areas or walkways.

Some examples of good specimen plants for large containers include:

Cornus drummondii: This native East Texas dogwood can only be grown well in a large container with soil to its liking - organic and slightly acidic, but makes a great specimen plant for a shady or part shady area.
Olea europea ‘Little Ollie’: This is a dwarf Olive tree that is attractively shaped, evergreen, and takes our dryness and heat well. Although it can be grown in-situ, it looks great as a container specimen plant.

These are only a few of the many unusual or specimen plants that can be used in your garden or landscape, but a word of caution here, a specimen plant should draw attention to the entire garden, not steal the show. It should add visual stimulus to your overall garden, and be compatible with everything around it.

So look for that special spot, and be thinking about how you can use specimen plants, in addition to whimsical and hardscape items, to add variety and stimulus to your garden’s overall appearance.

That thread-leafed Arborvitae we have in the front has drawn so much attention to our overall front yard xeriscape. It’s done its job well!
This year marked the 6th anniversary of the East Austin Garden Fair. We celebrated that milestone by moving to a new location on a new date.

The Fair was held on April 14 at Parque Zaragoza Recreation Center located at 2608 E. Gonzales Street. It turned out to be a terrific location. The staff at Zaragoza could not have been more supportive of our event, and were thrilled that we were there. They were impressed by the fact that we had about 200 visitors, saying that was the most people that had ever visited the center for an event.

And the really good news is that they want us back next year, and the year after. We think we have found a permanent home for the East Austin Garden Fair! To thank them for their hospitality, plans are being developed to help design and build a raised bed garden for the after school program, and the teenage youth they serve on a daily basis. You’ll be hearing more about that as the plan develops.

This year’s theme was “Grow Well-Grow Your Own” with a focus on health, nutrition, and of course, growing your own vegetables. In addition to AgriLife Extension Service staff and Master Gardeners, the Sustainable Food Center, the Herb Society of Austin, the Austin Organic Gardeners, the Green Corn Project, Home Depot Kids Workshop and the City of Austin also participated.

There were over 20 booths and demonstrations that included activities, demonstrations and information for kids and adults: Starting a School Garden, Rainwater Harvesting, Beekeeping, Backyard Chickens, Fruit and Citrus for Central Texas, Nutrition and Cooking, Good Bug/Bad Bug - just to name a few. The Greenhouse folks contributed 200+ plants for the Plant Give-Away, and Lone Star Nursery (an East Austin business) contributed about 10 flats of 4-inch heirloom tomatoes.
This year we added speakers to the format. Master Gardener Joe Posern spoke on “Growing Vegetables”, and Forrest Arnold of the Austin Organic Gardeners talked about “Controlling Pests Organically.” Both were well attended.

The 2012 recipient of the “Gardener of the Year” award went to the members of the East Austin Garden Club. What a fabulous group of people they are. Alice Houston Johnson, the Club’s president, accepted the award. The group was formed in 1980, and has been active since. Mrs. Johnson reported that they had recently added 12 new members to their organization, and have plans to grow it even larger. That speaks volumes of their Club, and of their service to the East Austin community.

A big THANK YOU goes to our sponsors: Sustainable Food Center, Chase Bank, Tecolote Farm, Rudy’s, Subway, Lone Star Nursery, Johnson’s Backyard Garden, The Home Depot, Green Corn Project, and HEB.

All-in-all it was a wonderful day despite the wind, which was relentless. The members of the planning committee want to thank all who participated in volunteering! You did an amazing job, and we believe the citizens of East Austin enjoyed their time with us.

Hope to see you at the Fair next year!

Manda Rash, Chair
East Austin Garden Fair Planning Committee
Clyde Adley
Liz Caskey
Frankie Hart
Mikala McFerren
Maggie Tate
Preparing Your Landscape for Summer

Thursday, May 17
10am-12pm

Travis County AgriLife Extension Office
1600-B Smith Road
Austin, TX, 78721

There are numerous things you can do yourself to ensure healthier, bushier, plants with increased blooms. Learn when to fertilize, which plants, which plants to pinch back and other tips from a pro.

Small Space Gardening

Saturday, May 19
10am-12pm

Austin Community College South Campus
1820 W. Stassney Lane, Rm 1130
Austin, TX 78745

Space challenged? Do you have more plants (or ideas) than garden to put them in? Make the most of your garden when every square inch counts. This seminar is full of inspiring ideas to help you do so much more with the area you have, and make better use of the entire garden. You'll learn how to design in layers, borrow your neighbor's landscape, and use color, containers and creativity to add punch to small spaces.

This seminar is free and open to the public, but seating is limited. Reservations are not required, but are recommended. Signup at: http://travis-tx.tamu.edu/horticulture/ and click on seminar registration.

Empty, reserved seats will become open seating at 9:50 am. This seminar is free and open to the public.
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Visit the websites: www.tcmastergardeners.org and http://travis-tx.tamu.edu

The End...

Time to Get Gardening!