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Cover Photo by Liath Appleton

Right: lettuce can be grown throughout the winter

Photo by Bruce Leander

November Meeting Speaker — Blake Hendon

**Backyard Mammals and Marsupials**

Part 3 of our “natural neighbors” series is continuing with “Backyard Mammals and Marsupials,” brought to us by Blake Hendon of the Texas Parks & Wildlife Dept. Want to know what nocturnal visitors might be digging holes, knocking over pots & plants, and doing whatever in your yard?

Blake Hendon is the lead biologist for Travis, Hays and Blanco Counties – with the Texas Parks & Wildlife (Wildlife Division - Hill Country District) providing technical guidance to private landowners on wildlife and natural resource management issues. He holds BS & MS degrees from TAMU in Animal Ecology and Rangeland Ecology and Management.

Master Gardener Meeting information:
Wednesday, Nov 7, 2012 starting at 7 pm
Zilker Botanical Garden
The first freeze for Central Texas usually makes an appearance in mid to late November. Make sure your veggies are well mulched, and be prepared to cover tender plants and young transplants with floating row cover or bed sheets when the temperature is predicted to dip into the low 30s. Use bricks, heavy rocks, soil or U-shaped pins to secure the row cover so it doesn’t blow off. Established plantings of broccoli, cabbage, greens, root crops and other cool season vegetables can handle a short freeze without damage.

Harvest winter squash and near-ripe tomatoes and be sure to disconnect hoses. Wrap faucets and drain sprinklers before that first freezing night arrives.

Take advantage of mild winter days to clean out dead and dying vegetable plants and prep beds for spring planting. Even in winter don’t leave your soil naked and exposed. Fallow vegetable beds can be covered with a heavy layer of mulch, or they can be seeded with an enriching cover crop such as crimson clover, hairy vetch or cereal rye. These cold hardy cover crops insulate the soil, prevent erosion, suppress weeds, and when turned under in spring, enrich the soil with organic matter. Most feed stores and nurseries sell cover crop seed, but act quickly as the window for planting is coming to a close. Several weeks before spring planting cut down the tops of cover crops with a mower or string trimmer, and incorporate into the soil.

Stockpile leaves over the next few months to use for spring and summer mulch. Leaves can also be mixed with kitchen waste and added to the compost pile over the winter. If the compost pile needs a little revitalizing, turn it with a spading fork, and sprinkle the layers with a fertilizer that is high in nitrogen. Water the pile occasionally to keep it moist.
If you are not quite ready to go dormant for the winter, then continue to plant hardy, cool season veggies that can handle the cold, such as beets, kale, collards, turnips, lettuce and spinach.

collards, kale and other hardy greens love our winter weather

cold hardy and delicious, ‘Tokyo Cross’ turnips ready to harvest

Photos: Bruce Leander
Pill Bugs
by Wizzy Brown

Pillbugs, or roly-polys, are crustaceans, closely related to crayfish and shrimp. Although terrestrial, these creatures must live in moist environments to be able to survive. They may sometimes invade homes in large numbers, but they are a nuisance pest and do not bite, sting, transmit diseases or cause physical damage to the home or its contents.

Pillbugs are ¼”- ½” in length, with dark grey coloring (Fig. 1). Their oval bodies are convex above, and either flat or concave underneath. Pillbugs have seven pairs of legs and two pairs of antennae, and they roll up into a ball when disturbed.

Pillbugs are scavengers, feeding mainly on decaying organic matter. They may occasionally feed on young, tender plants, but damage is typically not significant. They can be found under mulch, flower pots, compost, stones or other items resting on the ground.

They often invade crawl spaces and homes at ground level with common points of entry being door thresholds and expansion joints. When these pests are seen indoors, there is usually a large population breeding on the outside of the home near the foundation. Since pillbugs require moisture, they do not survive indoors for more than a few days unless there are very moist or damp conditions.

To manage infestations inside the home, rely on sanitation and exclusion techniques. Repair or replace door thresholds and seal expansion joints where pillbugs may be entering the structure. Pesticides are not usually needed indoors to manage these occasional invaders. They soon die on their own from lack of moisture. The pests can be swept up using a broom and dustpan or a vacuum and disposed of.

Outdoors, move any piles of debris away from the foundation of the home. If there are high numbers in and around landscape beds, turn the mulch to allow it to dry out. This will make the area uninhabitable. Any leaky faucets or irrigation lines, as well as leaking air conditioning units should be repaired to eliminate moisture buildup. You may choose a pesticide to treat mulched areas or other areas that are harboring large pillbug populations. Look for products labeled for pillbugs, sowbugs or isopods.
A Winter Garden Needn’t Be Boring
by Bob Beyer

The lawn has turned brown, the perennials are sleeping underground, trees have lost their leaves, nothing is blooming, and garden activity has come to a winter halt. What could be more depressing to a gardener! Well, that’s one way of looking at it, but let me offer another perspective. Winter has its own unique show and advantages. You just need to plant for winter as well as summer to ensure year-round interest.

Features that come into prominence during winter include the predominance of evergreen plants, exfoliating bark, contorted twigs and branching structures, visually interesting bark, special winter colorations, persistent berries and seed pods, ornamental grass plumage, and prominent buds. In fact, these features that are not seen in the warmer weather prime time garden, are actually photogenic, and can keep the excitement of gardening going all year round.

Evergreen plants such as hollies, hardy palms and cycads, conifers, Loropetalum, Texas Mountain Laurel, hardy Agaves and Yuccas, Viburnum, Abelia, Elaeagnus, hardy citrus, just to name a few, add color to the winter garden, especially if variegated. Some plants are semi-evergreen depending on how low the temperature falls, such as roses, dwarf pomegranate, and Barbados cherry. Green is a color to be enjoyed during the winter months.

Exfoliating bark can be very intriguing such as that seen on varieties of Crepe Myrtles, Chinese Elm, and Sycamore as good examples. Exfoliating means a peeling away of a layer of smooth bark to reveal a deeper color beneath.

Contorted twigs and unusual branching structures are eye catching in winter and not well seen during growth season when leaves hide these features. Examples are the contorted varieties of Mulberry, Hazelnut and Willow.

In central Texas, you need not go far to see unusual bark. Just look at our native and local Bur Oak with its rugged and craggy bark. Branching patterns seen on “naked” trees range from the rigid, rough look of the Bur Oak to the fine textured, compact, smooth look of the Mexican Plum. Some trees and shrubs have winged bark. Bark on a tree is definitely an ornamental feature not to be overlooked.

Special winter colorations can be seen on many yuccas, junipers, arborvitae, and other conifers. This is usually a bronze, pinkish, or reddening coloration brought about by cold temperatures, which, in effect, reduces photosynthesis during this dormant period of the year.
Persistent berries and seed pods are common among many central Texas plants. The Yaupon Holly, although evergreen also, holds its bright red berries throughout the winter to provide food for many of our local birds, and the deciduous Possumhaw holly does the same - red berries lining bare branches throughout the winter. The Crepe Myrtles cling to their seed pods throughout the winter, even after they open and disperse the seeds. Roses going dormant display colorful seed pods known as hips.

Grass plumage can be very beautiful adding a unique texture to the winter garden, so don’t be too quick to prune back those dead clumps of grass. That can be done in early spring. Enjoy the seed plumage while it lasts. Muhlenbergias and Miscanthus are particularly beautiful and maintain their plumage well into winter.

Prominent pubescent buds can be seen on deciduous Magnolias during winter. They form during fall, persist during winter, and remind us that spring won’t be far away. The plants in the Magnolia family, whether evergreen or deciduous, display this feature well.

Winter sometimes produces unusual happenings in the garden. Often a bulbous plant will get confused by changing weather patterns and pop up unexpectedly, or a flower bud will open on a warm weather day thinking that it is spring already. A walk through the yard and garden in winter can be interesting, and like any other time of the year, there are almost always unexpected surprises.

If you plan your garden and landscape to provide for seasonal variations, and ensure that there will be plantings to inspire you regardless of the season, your gardening joy will be never ending. Every season has its rewards including the dormant season of winter.

So what can the gardener do in the garden during this down time?
1. Prepare beds for next growing season. Add compost and other enrichments
2. Garden construction work (hardscaping, xeriscape preparation)
3. Plant trees and shrubs to allow roots to become established over winter.
4. Mulch well to prevent root freezing and promote warmer soil temperatures

BUT
Never prune shrubbery during dormancy, as it induces new growth which will be killed.
Never fertilize during dormancy for same reason as not pruning.
All About Bulbs

Thursday, Nov 15
10am-12pm

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

Learn all about bulbs, whether planting in the ground or forcing the bulbs to grow indoors. This class will include a discussion of reliable varieties for our conditions, methods to success, and requirements for indoor growing such as containers and media.
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Daphne Richards
1600-B Smith Road, Austin, Texas 78721
512-854-9600   drichards@ag.tamu.edu
The Compost Bin November 2012

This issue of the Compost Bin has been published thanks to the contributions of the following Travis County Master Gardeners and Wizzie Brown — Texas AgriLife Extension:

Photographers: Liath Appleton Bruce Leander

Contributing Writers: JaNet Barkely-Booher Bob Beyer Wizzy Brown Patty Leander

Editors and Layout: Liath Appleton Steve Messana

Webmaster: Paula Middleton

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512-854-9600

Visit the websites: www.tcmastergardeners.org and http://travis-tx.tamu.edu

The End...

Time to Get Gardening!