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The Story of Habitat Restoration at Selah, Bamberger Ranch Preserve in Johnson City

Speaker: Colleen Gardner, Executive Director

(Special thanks to MG Pat Mokry for suggesting this topic, and to MG Rosalie Russell for making arrangements for a group field trip (details in progress)

The Selah, Bamberger Ranch is a 5,500 acre nature preserve located in the scenic Texas Hill Country. Once described as "the worst piece of real estate in Blanco County," Selah is now a state and national award winning habitat restoration project that spans 45 years. Long regarded as a model of pragmatic and sound land stewardship practices, Selah also serves as an educational institution that hosts 3,000 guests annually. The story of “before” and “after” is inspiring and replicable with every management decision beginning first with the question "What’s Best For Mother Nature?"

You can preview info on The Selah at bambergerranch.org
In the Vegetable Garden
by Patty Leander

For weeks now the thought of fresh tomatoes, beans, cucumbers and okra, home-grown and sun-drenched, has been dancing across my consciousness. It’s a form of visualization that I just can’t escape this time of year, and it is what drives me to dig, plant, weed, water and sweat. I’m sure you are experiencing similar spring fever symptoms!

Fortunately the mild days of March are easy on both garden and gardener. We usually see our last frost early in the month, after which it is safe to begin planting warm season vegetables. Our goal in the spring vegetable garden is to plant as early as possible so we can harvest as early as possible, not so much for bragging rights (wait, this is Texas so that’s not entirely true!), but rather to avoid the summer misery of insects, disease and stress that comes with summer’s blistering heat. It’s hard to imagine such torment during these premiere gardening days, but it will come.

If your space is limited, by all means stick with the vegetables that will yield the most satisfaction and dining enjoyment for you and your family. I like to try a few new varieties each season along with some old favorites that I know are reliable producers. I also grow both heirlooms and hybrids as both have their advantages – and diversity in a garden is always a good thing.

Here is the vegetable gardener’s checklist for March:

• Pay attention to the weather reports, the long range forecast, and experienced vegetable gardeners to get an idea of when it is safe to plant. Generally by mid-March it is safe to plant green beans, butter beans, cucumbers, squash, tomatoes, eggplant, peppers and corn, but have some row cover or old sheets on hand in case of a late cold snap.

• Tomatoes, peppers and eggplant should go into the garden as transplants, but other warm season vegetables can be planted from seed directly in the garden. Use a soil thermometer to monitor the temperature - when soil reaches 60-65° seeds will have their best chance at germination.

• If soil is dry, water well before planting any seeds.

• Cucumbers, winter squash, small melons and pole beans are vining crops that can be grown vertically on a trellis, a teepee, along a fence or up a sturdy tomato cage.

A medium size garbage bag, split open and secured to the tomato cage with clothespins, helps protect tomato transplants from wind damage.

‘Fortex’ pole bean produces in about 60 days. The 7-10” stringless pods have a delicious, beany flavor.
In the Vegetable Garden

- Continue harvesting broccoli, beets, lettuce, spinach and other cool weather crops; remove spent plants and leaf debris as weather warms and plants decline.
- Soon after tomatoes have been planted in the ground, anchor a tomato cage or other support over the plant. Wrap outside of cage with row cover or plastic to protect tender plants from wind. If frost threatens wrap entire cage and close at the top.
- Thin onions to a 4-6” spacing, the thinnings can be enjoyed as green onions.
- The very popular Sunshine Community Garden Spring Plant Sale takes place Saturday, March 1. They will have lots of new and unusual tomato varieties as well as plenty of old favorites. The sale starts at 9:00AM and the line to get in is always long so get there early!

Photos: Bruce Leander

Vigorous cucumber vines grow up and around a bamboo teepee

‘Contender’ green beans, always a favorite

Lovely blooms of ‘Louisiana Purple Pod’ pole bean.
Cabbage Loopers
by Wizzie Brown

Cabbage loopers are light green with narrow white stripes that run along the length of the body. They have smooth bodies with a few bristles on their back. These caterpillars grow to be about 1 ½- 2 inches in length. These insects become moths in the adult stage. Moths are grayish-brown with a silvery “figure 8” marking on the forewings. Eggs are yellowish-white to green in color, dome-shaped, ridged and usually laid singly on the surface of the leaf. It is possible for small clusters; 6-7 eggs may be found. Pupae overwinter and adult moths emerge in the spring to mate and lay eggs. The caterpillars hatch out of the eggs in about 3 days and the whole life cycle from egg to adult takes about one month.

The larva, or caterpillar, is the damaging stage. They have chewing mouthparts and fed on foliage of a wide variety of plants including cabbage, kale, lettuce, beets, spinach, peas, potatoes, tomato and cotton among others. Damage appears as irregularly shaped holes chewed between major leaf veins. They may also bore into heads of cabbage or similar crops and cause contamination with their bodies and frass (excrement).

There are numerous natural enemies of cabbage loopers that help to manage the pests, so make sure to target pesticide use when possible to conserve the beneficial in the landscape. For treatment, you can try hand picking or using a pesticide. Some active ingredients to look for include Bacillus thuringiensis var. kurstaki (targets caterpillars specifically), spinosad (targets foliage feeders), pyrethrins or other botanicals.

For more information or help with identification, contact Wizzie Brown, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service Program Specialist at 512.854.9600. Check out my blog at www.urban-ipm.blogspot.com
In the last few days I’ve acquired several new Dracaenas, bringing my total up to—well, a lot. I’ve been noticing them more and more in public places, too—I can think of four libraries, right off, that have at least one, in varying conditions of health.

As a matter of fact, the first Dracaena I got was while I was a librarian. A group used my library during the summer and left behind a small _D. marginata_ in a decorative four-inch pot. I finally took it home and repotted it after waiting a year for it to be reclaimed. Six years later, it’s waist-high. Common names for it are ‘Madagascar Dragon Tree’—or my favorite, ‘rainbow plant’.

I’ve got two _D. fragrans_. One is nice and full and beautiful; the other is still just a big log in a pot. My mom gave me that one for Christmas last year. She saw it advertised in an infomercial and got very excited about it. I haven’t yet plucked up the courage to tell her that it’s really just a corn plant. One of my books says, “Because of their size and hardiness, these are popular for lobbies and entranceways of office buildings.” They can get top-heavy though, so it’s a good idea to put them into a heavy pot, or inside a heavy decorative container. I had mine in a laundry basket with stones around the base for a while. They don’t mind dry air. They don’t mind drying out sometimes. They don’t need to be repotted very often. They are easy for public places.

I have quite a few _D. deremensis_ that I’ve rescued from the reduced rack at a local box store. ‘Janet Craig’ is a solid dark green, _bausei_ and _warneckii_ are both white-banded, and there’s also white, yellow and green stripes. Some of mine are pretty stubby-looking at the moment because I trimmed all the brown tips off when I bought them. They’ll grow, but they shouldn’t get more than about four feet, according to my books. They seem to be a good deal more sensitive to drying out that the _D. fragrans_. One of my very new ones is a real beauty—and I bought it at the grocery store! It’s in a glass cube with pebbles and rocks, growing in water.

_D. sanderiana_ is highly available. Last week I saw them for sale at a drug store! The common names, ‘lucky’ or ‘curly bamboo’, tricked me for a long time, but once I really looked at one up close, I could see the Dracaena, hiding behind the tricky name. I bought a beautiful one last week at a discount club. Another common name (but new to me) is ‘friendship bamboo’. _D. sanderiana_ can also be grown not-curved, just as a houseplant. Sometimes it’s called a ‘ribbon Dracaena’ or ‘Sander’s Dracaena’. None of my old houseplant books refer to curly bamboo in their discussions of _Dracaena_—I had to go online to find information about them. (I know there are books that do talk about them—I just have old houseplant books I’ve bought at used bookstores! I check out new books from the library....where I check out their houseplants, too!)
In reading up on *Dracaena* I was able to finally identify my mystery plant. The problem was that it just doesn’t look like a *Dracaena*. But it is -- *D. Godseffiana*. I’d really like to repot mine but it has six inches of roots coming through the bottom of its pot. The roots reach the water in the bottom of its cache pot...and it’s really happy that way. I guess that’s one for the books!
A cold, gray, drizzly Friday the 13th in December would not seem like the most auspicious time to visit a farm, but that was the day I had arranged to meet with the kind folk at Coyote Creek Organic Feed Mill and home of Jeremiah Cunningham’s World’s Best Eggs. I wanted to satisfy my curiosity about how hens can be raised and eggs produced in open-range, organic conditions, and what makes these eggs “the world’s best.” I could tell right away, as I drove down the twisting country road and through the modest farm gate, that this was not a farm set up for regular visitors, so I especially appreciated the welcome from Emily, Cameron, and Adam in the tiny, warm front office.

We got to talking chickens right away. They showed me a wall chart of many kinds of chickens to help me identify one of my own backyard hens. Cameron cracked open an egg gathered that morning to show me the bright orange-yellow of the yolk, rich in vitamin A. This egg would not go to waste. It would be the second breakfast for the shiny black cat waiting just outside the back door as we left the office to see the feed mill and visit the hens and chicks on the farm.

Right outside the back of the office, we were standing under huge towers and shiny clean storage bins. Cameron explained that each held one of the many ingredients of Coyote Creek organic feeds (corn, peas, and wheat, for example) which are variously formulated for all types of livestock.

Then we walked to a hen enclosure. Four hundred happy red hens were grazing on about an acre of land enclosed in a white electric fence. In the center of the enclosure was the hen house, a large shed with wide doors that open up on two opposite sides, and windows cut in the other two sides, with about 40 nest boxes lining the windowed sides. The floor is made of 1” wooden slats for most of the hens to perch during the night, allowing the hens a comfortable, clean place to roost. The 1” slats are the right size for their claws, and the openings between the slats allow the poop to fall through to the ground underneath. The hens at the top of the pecking order get to roost on top of the nest boxes.

Inside the hen house there is a watering trough and a feed trough, each made from a large PVC pipe with holes cut in the top. Although the hens are free to roam and graze in the field during the day where there are more water and feed troughs, it is important to have water and feed inside the hen house on inclement days and to keep the water warm when it is cold. The hens simply won’t drink water
that isn’t at least 45°! Fitted with a float valve and attached to a water hose, the water trough fills automatically. The feed trough is filled by hand at a rate of a quarter of a pound of feed per day per hen. There is also a box of wood ash inside the hen house for dust baths. The wood ash has a fairly high sulfur content which creates an unfavorable environment for feather mites and helps to keep the hens healthy and happy.

In addition to the outdoor feed and water, the field the hens roam is green with clover and other native plants and grasses. Because the hens and the hen house are moved to a different enclosure every month, the clover and grasses don’t generally need to be reseeded, but must be regularly cleared of the mesquite that volunteers. For about a month, the land is allowed to regenerate (and the poop to decompose). Also, moving the hen house solves the issue of the buildup of chicken poop beneath it.

Coyote Creek has 23 hen flocks rotating over many acres of land. With each flock numbering around 400, and each hen laying an egg almost every day, Coyote Creek delivers eggs to retailers in Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Louisiana, and beyond.

In each flock, the hens are all the same age, all hatched on the same day. Uniformity of age makes it possible to monitor the egg-laying rate and health of the flock. Hens lay efficiently for about five years, and then production tapers off. Older flocks are taken to a person in San Antonio who gets the hens to backyard flock owners who are fine with lower egg production. Coyote Creek orders day-old chicks several times throughout the year to rotate out the older flocks and maintain consistent egg production.

Walking past a flock of pullets who had not yet begun to lay, we came to the chick barn, an entirely enclosed structure with two round corrals inside made of wooden stakes and cardboard sides. Each corral is covered at the back with a half-dome of plastic and has several heat sources to keep the chicks warm: a propane heater with a round hood two feet off the ground reflecting heat down into the corral, two or three grow lamps three inches off the floor, and incandescent bulbs. Food and water are also plentiful with feeders and water every few feet. The floor of the corral is a moving carpet of hundreds of wee chicks, one week old now, cheeping, running, standing, pecking, lively, curious, sociable, content, and totally adorable in their warm, spacious, bright corral, in spite of the nearly freezing rain pattering on the barn roof.

Several times a year, Coyote Creek orders one-day old Rhode Island Red and White Leghorn hybrid chicks from a supplier in College Station.
When the chicks first arrive, they must be kept very warm, 80 to 85 degrees. At one week old, they do well with temperatures in the 70s. Cameron used an infrared heat gun to measure the temperature of various places in the corral. It was cooler near the outer front edge, and warmer under the half-dome of plastic sheeting, but all within the comfortable range. Then, of course, there was no resisting a game of chase with the chicks. When Cameron shone the little red dot on the floor of the corral, the brave came closer to peck it, and the less trusting took one look, turned tail, and skittered away. Keeping all these babies alive and well, especially when they arrive on the coldest day of the year, is a true labor of love.

When the chicks are several weeks old, they are allowed to venture out of the barn and into a small, grassy area where they can have their first experience under the wide blue sky, grazing grass and foraging for bugs, before being moved into a hen house of their own, which will be their mobile home for the years they spend at Coyote Creek, moving from pasture to pasture through the seasons, a happy, healthy, and very productive life.

During the quick walk back to the office before the cold rain started again, I learned more about Cameron’s background in food technology and restaurant management, his passionate interest in fresh, healthy, organic food production, and plans for the future potential development of Coyote Creek. He told me about his “collaborative competition” with other organic egg producers in the area, sharing solutions and ideas, always looking for better ways to do what they do.

Before a friendly goodbye and handshake all around, I asked to be put on their email list to keep up with their news. For more information about Coyote Creek, visit their website at [http://coyotecreekfarm.org/mill/](http://coyotecreekfarm.org/mill/).
Busy Bees Workday at the Demo Garden
by Rosalie Russell

A flurry of activity is surging through the Demo Garden like bees around the first blooms in late winter. The ultimate goal is a garden that better exemplifies the Travis County Master Garden Association’s mission of providing sound, unbiased horticulture information to the public.

Eight new trial beds are currently under construction. The stone border surrounding each bed should be completed soon. The four large beds will be used for vegetable trials. Three beds are finished, and one on hold, until a tree stump and roots are less resistant! This year’s trial plans call for 4 or 5 different tomato varieties which will be repeated in three beds. One bed is the control bed. The other two might have different watering schedules. The four small beds will each be filled with different grass varieties. One grass sample will be the ‘Habiturf’ developed by The Wildflower Center.

The culinary herb garden is expanding. More herbs, and more space! A birdbath will accent the intersection of new pathways.

A number of plants were removed from the Butterfly Garden to increase the space for a more diverse selection of nectar and host plants. That pesky passion vine which popped up in numerous locations, and overwhelmed its trellis is being moved to the 8 foot high wire fence that separates the garden from the parking lot.

Big signs and little signs are coming soon. Large interpretive signs will be added this year. Prior to the Inside Austin Garden Tour, sturdier plant markers with labels that are supposed to be Texas tough will identify all the plant varieties.

We have a fun time working in the Demo Garden. You always learn something from someone! Please join us when you can.

Luci Gonzalez and Charlotte Grim clean out the vegetable bed.
Busy Bees Workday at the Demo Garden

Because of the road construction and the demands of completing several major projects before the Inside Austin Garden Tour, our workday schedule has changed. This is what we anticipate, but don’t consider this to be written in stone. Expected workdays in March: Saturday March 1 and 8, Friday March 21 and 28. Also expect workday on March 14 or 15, but construction will determine which day! Watch for the SignUp Genius invitation and sign up!

Tommie Clayton chops vegetable greenery for the compost bin.

Catherine Sewell and Gwen Taranto were part of the team working on the trial bed border.

Photos: Rosalie Russell
The Austin Area Garden Center - a 50 Year Legacy
by Marion Alsup

Let’s remember 1964. Gasoline cost 30 cents a gallon. Bread cost 21 cents a loaf. Average annual income in the U.S. was $6,000. The average cost of a new home was $13,000. The Dow Jones Industrial average closed the year at 874.

Funny Girl and Fiddler on the Roof premiered on Broadway. Mary Poppins, Dr. Strangelove and Goldfinger were among the top movies of the year. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. won the Nobel Peace Prize. Newcomers on the scene were the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Beach Boys, Supremes, joined by the Ford Mustang, BASIC computer language, IBM’s System 360 computer, Pop Tarts, Lucky Charms cereal, Sharpie markers and...the Austin Area Garden Center, which opened its doors on Oct. 25. 1964 was quite a year!

Fifty years went flying by, and the Austin Area Garden Center is still going strong, with 30 affiliated garden clubs. Our clubs and their members are still sharing the joys of gardening after all these years! Our neighbors can learn about gardening and the environment through meetings, workshops, flower shows and the 57th annual Zilker Garden Festival, which will be held this year on March 29-30.

I’d like to ask for your support in the year ahead.

• We need about 300 volunteers for Zilker Garden Festival. There are so many jobs to do and so many wonderful folks working hard and having a great time. Many have signed up already, but there are still a lot of jobs waiting, especially taking tickets at the front gate and helping with crafts and activities in Kids’ Corner.

• We have a new opportunity to reach the viewers of Central Texas Gardener on KLRU through a mutual sponsorship, which covers 10 and 15 second spots on CTG programs during the coming year. How are we going to fund the $10,000 cost of this worthwhile project? We have a matching challenge grant of $5,000 and are asking for donations from clubs and members to fund the rest. For example, your $50 contribution will be matched with an additional $50 for a total of $100. And you get to promote the Garden Center and donate to KLRU at the same time! You’ll be glad to know that we’re already well on our way to reaching our goal. Help us continue our legacy and extend our outreach to a new audience.

• Soon we will start planning a fall celebration/open house/plant sale to celebrate the 50th birthday of the Austin Area Garden Center building! I’m not sure yet what this celebration will involve, but I am sure that it will be a fun and rewarding event that everyone will want to participate in. We’ll need a lot of help with planning and managing this event!

Let’s all pitch in to support the Austin Area Garden Center so we can continue the legacy and share the joy of gardening for another 50 years!
Rain Water Harvesting  

Thursday, Mar 6  
10:00 am – noon  

Travis County East Service Center  
6011 Blue Bluff Rd, Austin TX  

Just in time for glorious spring showers, Master Gardener Ed Parken will give a presentation on rainwater harvesting at the AgriLife Extension Office as we continue our series on Dealing with Drought Conditions. Don’t let valuable rain water just wash down the gutter, when it could be watering your garden and landscaped. Learn the basics of rainwater harvesting and how to construct a system suited for your situation.  

Part of the Texas AgriLife Extension Water Conservation Series  
Register at https://agriliferegister.tamu.edu/TravisCounty or by phone 979-845-2604  
Click Here for Directions to Blue Bluff  

Heirloom Plants in the Spring Garden  

Saturday, Mar 8  
10am - Noon  

Zilker Botanical Gardens  
2220 Barton Springs Rd  
Austin TX  

Author of several gardening books and founding editor and publisher of Homegrown: Good Sense Organic Gardening, Judy Barrett will discuss the merits of heirloom plants in the spring garden. Find out what makes a plant an heirloom, the pros and cons of using heirloom plants, and which of these plants do well here in central Texas.  

This seminar is free with paid admission to Zilker Botanical Garden. 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) 477-8672.
Austin Area Events

**Zilker Garden Festival**

Saturday and Sunday, Mar 29-30  
10am - 5pm  

Zilker Botanical Gardens  
2220 Barton Springs Rd  
Austin TX  

For over 50 years, the annual Zilker Garden Festival has been a one-stop, garden shopping destination when spring arrives in Austin and Central Texas. A family-friendly event, the garden festival offers something for everyone.

View complete details at  
http://www.zilkergarden.org/about/events/ZGF2014/zgf.html
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This issue of the Compost Bin has been published thanks to the contributions of the following Travis County Master Gardeners and Wizzie Brown — Texas A&M AgriLife Extension

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The Compost Bin Submissions
We are always looking for Travis County Master Gardeners who are interested in writing for our monthly newsletter, and we would love to see your articles, photographs, book reviews and gardening ideas.

General Guidelines
• Please first email the editor to discuss potential article ideas.
• Email contributions as attachments (preferably in Word with a .doc or .rtf suffix).
• Please send images as separate attachments (preferably .jpg suffix). Don’t forget to include photographer acknowledgments and captions.

Send your submissions, announcements, questions and suggestions to: editor.compostbin@gmail.com

"It always amazes me to look at the little, wrinkled brown seeds and think of the rainbows in ‘em,” said Captain Jim. “When I ponder on them seeds I don’t find it nowise hard to believe that we’ve got souls that’ll live in other worlds. You couldn’t hardly believe there was life in them tiny things, some no bigger than grains of dust, let alone colour and scent, if you hadn’t seen the miracle, could you?”

— L.M. Montgomery, Anne’s House of Dreams