Greetings Master Gardeners and Interns!

You are all cordially invited to this year's annual TCMGA Holiday Dinner. This is always a great event, full of food and fellowship, and this year's Dinner is no exception.

Mark your calendars:

Date: Wednesday, December 3
Time: 7 PM
Place: Austin Area Garden Center
       (Please bring a dish to share -- an appetizer, salad, or dessert)

Come and celebrate the holidays with friends, old and new, as we look back on another successful year for TCMGA and look forward to the next. Hope to see you there.

Pat Creswell
VP Volunteer Coordinator for Certified Master Gardeners
The President’s Message

Well the holidays are here again. I hope that all of you had a wonderful Thanksgiving enjoying time with friends and family. Dan and I spent the week of Thanksgiving in Rockport. It was fabulous. We visited several wildlife refuge areas and were continually amazed to see Birds of Paradise growing and blooming in residential gardens. The Texas coast is truly a tropical paradise.

Logan had given me the address of the AgriLife Extension Office so on a cool Sunday afternoon we dropped by and toured the demonstration garden there. They have really done an amazing job in a small space including a wonderful children’s garden. It seems that all demonstration garden plants grow large…I’m sure it’s the tender loving care provided by its gardeners. We saw some beautiful tropical plants and a little envious that I could grow them in Austin.

And speaking of Logan, as you all know by now, he will be leaving us in mid-December to take a position with AgriLife Extension at Texas A&M (or “mecca” as we Master Gardeners prefer to call it). From what Logan has told me, it’s a perfect fit given his background in coastal agriculture. I am sorry to see him go as I was looking forward to working with him during the next year. Logan leaves us with great ideas for moving our organization forward and I’m confident that we will implement many of his suggestions and programs.

We wish Logan great success and hope that he realizes that even though he was only here a few months, he made a positive impact on our Association.

Thanks to all of you for a great Master Gardening year! We had many successes this year…the 2nd Annual Passion for Plants that was well attended, our most successful garden tour, a new roof on the greenhouse, amazing internal and external educational programs, the formation of a Plant Clinic team, a new oak wilt brochure publication and many other activities too numerous to mention.

I’m looking forward to 2009 and working with the Board and the membership to move TCMGA forward.

Best wishes to everyone for a happy and safe holiday season.

Manda Rash, President
The name poinsettia, coined by historian and horticulturist William Prescott, commemorates Joel Roberts Poinsett, the first US Ambassador to Mexico (1825-1828) and the person who introduced the plant into the United States. Poinsett’s real love in the scientific field was botany. He had his own greenhouses on his Greenville, SC plantation. While he was visiting the Taxco area in 1828 he was enchanted by the bright red blooms he saw there. He immediately sent some plants back to his plantation where he began propagating the plants and sending them to friends and botanical gardens. A few cuttings found their way to Robert Buist, a Pennsylvania nurseryman. He is thought to be the first person to sell the plant under its botanical name Euphorbia pulcherrima (translated to mean “the most beautiful Euphorbia”) that German botanist Carl Ludwig Willdenow had named.

Poinsettias are not universally called this around the world. They are known as Mexican flame leaf, Christmas star, winter rose, Noche Buena, Cuetlaxochitl (in Mexican Nahuatl) and Stella di Natale (in Italy). Poinsettias are originally native to the central and southern parts of Mexico where it grows as a shrub up to 16 ft. The brightly colored “flowers” of poinsettias are really bracts, modified leaves. The flowers are really the small greenish-yellow structures called cyathia in the center of the bracts.

There are more than 100 cultivars of poinsettias ranging from the traditional red to pink, orange, pale green, cream, speckled, marbled, double ruffled and white types. Even with all the unique cultivars, the majority (74%) of Americans still prefer the traditional red color (and in North America this is a bluish-red). Next popular, with an 8% preference is white and then 6% pink. One technique that is here to stay and takes some getting used to if you are a traditional red fancier are the fantasy colors that have found their way onto poinsettias resulting in blue, plum, turquoise, yellow or orange spray painted plants. Some people like the non-traditional colors, especially when plants are still around for Easter. Some stores are selling glittered in addition to painted plants.

Up until about 20 years ago, poinsettia varieties were virtually all controlled by the Paul Ecke Family in Encinitas, CA. They dominated the poinsettia market owing to a secret grafting technology they used to get full, compact plants. Today many growers have adopted this technique, resulting in many more colors and leaf forms being available.
“Reflowering” for a second Christmas is not impossible; it just takes time and effort. Poinsettias are short day plants. Triggering leaf coloration requires about two months of uninterrupted long, dark nights in the fall. Any light that reaches the plant at night is likely to interrupt the blooming cycle. Most plants will color up after 10 weeks of complete darkness from 5 pm to 8 am daily.

The public belief that a two year old child in 1919 died from consuming a poinsettia leaf is just a myth. Poinsettia leaves are not toxic, just may cause an allergic reaction from the latex for those that are sensitive. If eaten, poinsettias sometimes cause mild diarrhea and vomiting only.

Poinsettias have “toughened” up significantly in recent years. They no longer wilt, shrivel and drop their leaves as easily at a hint of a cold draft. Keep them warm, away from direct sunlight, and moist (not wet). Select the freshest plants that have dark green lower leaves that are not wilted, completely colored bracts and flowers present.

National Poinsettia Day is December 12th, the death anniversary of Joel Roberts Poinsett. Poinsettias are the most popular Christmas plant with more than 61 million sold in 2004. California leads the poinsettia growing with Texas ranked second.

Anne Marie Van Nest
Vegetable gardening in most of Texas can be a year round hobby . . . or an obsession. It is easy to get sucked in by the fresh taste and healthy diet provided by our own home grown produce. Not to mention the miracle of planting a tiny seed and watching it grow into something that can nourish our bodies. Amazing. But December seems like a pretty good time to sit back and take a breather. I try to find a couple of evenings during the month when I can sit down with my garden notes and diagrams from this year’s vegetable patch and sketch out my 2009 garden plans, taking into account crop rotation and new varieties to try.

And at this time of year, as my turnips, mustard and collards are ready for harvest, I understand why my Southern ancestors depended on these greens for sustenance. They are easy to grow in the cool season, they store well, and when served up with a side of cornbread and plenty of pot likker they are downright delicious. Add a hearty bowl of black-eyed peas and you’ve got the perfect meal for New Year’s Day, filled with good luck and prosperity.

I hope that you also have a chance to sit back and contemplate your garden successes of the past year and I wish you many more in 2009!

Here’s to a bountiful harvest,

Patty Leander
Thanks to everyone who came by to lend a hand during our greenhouse workday in November (including a special thanks to our new interns). An additional greenhouse orientation took place in late November on a Saturday morning for interns.

The greenhouse workday saw lots of activity at the potting bench. Cuttings of perennials and shrubs from the mist system were transferred to 4” pots. The space opened up with the removal of these potted up cuttings was immediately filled by more newly stuck cuttings that will be sold at Zilker Botanical Garden.

A planning and strategy meeting was held at the greenhouse in mid-November. Many topics were discussed including irrigation, winter preparation, Zilker Garden Festival seeding and propagation list. First, a review of the mist bench irrigation system and the possibilities for future expansion and upgrades were discussed. Many promising ideas are being followed up upon. Secondly, plans for winter preparation in the greenhouse were identified (heater pilot lighting, warmer tropical plant bench, heating mats). A tentative list of tomatoes, peppers and herbs were identified that will be sown for the Zilker Garden Festival sale. In addition, a working list of plants to propagate in preparation for Zilker Garden Festival was prepared. This list will be used during the next two months to direct work day activities. Watch for an email message asking for additional plants that the greenhouse is looking to obtain. Many thanks to Don Telge, Holly Plotner, Molly Clark and Marian Stasney for their input and ideas during this meeting.

Anne Van Nest, Marian Stasney and Molly Clark
A little background...the 1st conference was held in 2004, the 2nd in 2006, and our third this year. Very few of our Master Gardeners attend the State MG Conference; we collectively wanted to offer a one day affordable, educational conference within easy driving distance for our central Texas Master Gardeners. Our conference is modeled on the State Conference; we grant attendees 6-8 continuing education hours (State offers more). It took our committee about 14 months to plan this conference with numerous weeknight meetings in Seguin and San Marcos to accomplish the task and a ton of emails back and forth, plus many side trips and phone calls.

Note: This conference granted 8 CEUs; you must report this yourself when you turn in your MG volunteer hours – you are doing that aren’t you?

Our popularity is growing - 214 Master Gardeners all over Texas from El Paso to Harris counties attended our conference. (There is even talk of other counties coordinating regional conferences in their areas!) Judging from the attendee feedback (and suggestions) it was a great success. We thank you for your support and sincerely hope more of you will attend our next conference in 2010; we will keep the theme and location under wraps for now! If you haven’t attended a State MG Conference please do so if at all possible – see the State MG web site for details: [www.texasmastergardeners.com](http://www.texasmastergardeners.com)

A special “thank you” to Paula Middleton for keeping our web site ([www.tcmastergardeners.org](http://www.tcmastergardeners.org)) up to date with conference details and forms!

Thanks to our Master Gardener volunteers from Travis, Guadalupe, Comal and Hays counties who helped prepare for and staff the conference on November 8. Travis County volunteers were Janet Church, Jennifer Lindley, Rosalie Russell, and Linda Graham; thanks to volunteers manning the Master Gardener Phone Desk who fielded calls asking for conference information.

Many businesses and governmental groups contributed to the goody bags and we just couldn’t have held the event without the generosity of Texas Disposal Systems and the Gregory family who have hosted all our conferences at their Exotic Game Ranch & Pavilion.

Central Texas Gardeners Conference Standing Committee:
Travis County – Susan Jung & Tommie Clayton
Comal County – Germaine & Don Tuff
Guadalupe County – Jean Vanderheider & George Ammermann
Hays County – Anna Martinez Boles

Again...thank you for attending - see you in 2010!

Tommie Clayton
**Handmade Cement Leaves - Perfect for Gift-Giving!**

We learned to make cement leaves this year at the state MG convention. They turned out so good that they would make terrific presents. This is a messy project, so it is best to do it outside or in the garage.

Start by collecting interesting leaves. It’s best to look at the back of the leaf, as this is what will make the impression. My favorites include caladium and elephant ears because they are smooth on the edge and have large veins. Leaves with deep lobes are difficult to work with, so you will probably want to avoid them.

You’ll need cement or mortar mix (not concrete, as it has too many rocks in it.) I bought a small 20# bucket of cement and used the plastic bucket as a container to prepare the mix. You’ll also need a heavy cardboard box top or tray that is large enough for the leaf, sand, gloves, a mask and of course, your leaves.

The twenty pounds of cement mix made about 6 large leaves. If you’d like to make smaller leaves or fewer larger leaves, just mix a smaller amount.

Let’s get started! Using the box as a base, make a mound of moistened sand, which is a little larger than the leaf. If you want your final product to be deeper, mound up the sand in the center. The sand can be pushed up on one side to make the leaf look like it’s curled. As you make more leaves, you’ll find more ways to personalize them. For instance, if you leave the stem on the leaf and it’s big enough, it will form a hole. The hole is perfect to thread a dripper through. You can also cut out the area around the stem and insert a dripper before adding the cement. Otherwise, clip the stem flush with the leaf.

Mix the cement according to directions. Don’t forget to wear a mask and gloves during mixing. Use enough water for the mixture to have a consistency like clay, but not watery. Make sure it is well mixed; otherwise it will not show the details of the leaf.

Place the leaf face down on the sand (the back of the leaf will be facing you.) Add cement on top of the leaf and spread it almost to the edge. Continue adding cement until the leaf is least ¼” thick at the edge and thicker thru the middle (if it is too thin, it will crack or break.) If you want the leaf to sit up a little, make a “pedestal” on the back, by adding extra concrete. For it look more finished, roll the edges of the leaf back over the cement. I find that if you take time on the edges, the leaf comes out much prettier.

Let the cement dry at least 24 hours before peeling off the leaf. It’s best not to lift the leaf by the edge, as it may break. Let your leaf dry for 2 or 3 days before painting it.

Now for the fun part! There are many ways to prepare your leaf to accept color, from using cement sealer to cement paint. I found a method on the internet that used water, acrylic paint and a little glue to help the paint stick. I mixed the three together until the paint was a water color consistency. I painted the leaves solidly with the thinned paint, making sure that the paint went into the veins. I then went back to add details with other colors. I also liked the look of a metallic paint, which I dry brushed onto the high points of the leaf. I also painted several other leaves solidly and then sponged various colors on them, making sure to blend the colors. I also finished them with the metallic highlights. It’s fun to look at real leaves and try to copy the
colors. There are also concrete stains that can be added at mixing time.

To finish, apply exterior varnish according to label directions. The brand that I used recommended at least three coats for outdoor use, but some people use up to eight coats. Make sure to also coat the back, so that moisture won’t be absorbed.

For more ideas, search the internet for “concrete leaves.” A great resource, which includes step by step pictures of a leaf birdbath on a pedestal, including a video can be found at the Garden Gate Magazine’s web site: [http://www.gardengatemagazine.com/extras/53birdbath1.php](http://www.gardengatemagazine.com/extras/53birdbath1.php).

Liz Caskey
Native Landscape Recognition Award Presented to Hella Holoubek

On Sunday, November 2 Hella Holoubek and the Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Church in Cedar Park were presented the Native Landscape Recognition Award by the Williamson County Chapter of the Native Plant Society of Texas (NPSOT). Hella, a member of the Church and the Travis County Master Gardeners Association (TCMGA), was recognized for her work in creating a landscape that is the product of a cooperative effort between congregation members and TCMGA.

Located on El Salido Parkway in Cedar Park, this landscape was recognized for the following:

- Preservation of many existing live oak, cedar elm, hackberry, juniper, and other native trees scattered throughout the church grounds.
- Formal gardens at the front of the church and a wildflower meadow nearby made up primarily of native annuals and perennials.
- Selection and use of non-native plant species which are not considered invasive.
- All annuals reseed themselves. The required maintenance consists of manual weeding, removing overly aggressive perennials, and any necessary trimming and clean up.
- Minimal fertilizer is used, and no pesticides are allowed. Boiling water is used to fight fire ants.
- In November 2005 this landscape received registration from the National Wildlife Federation as a certified backyard habitat. The garden is a haven for butterflies, which are most numerous in late summer and fall. Increasing numbers of caterpillars have been observed, and installation of a birdbath/fountain is attracting more birds.
- The landscape is a pleasant complement to the church buildings and is visible to the general public traveling on El Salido Parkway.

The Williamson County Chapter of NPSOT has created this recognition process with three goals in mind:

1. Recognize the work of developers and private landscapers who choose native landscapes and who design and maintain them to a high level of excellence.
2. Bring this excellence to the attention of the general public to help the community better understand the possibilities and advantages of native landscaping.
3. Demonstrate to private landscapers and developers the possibility of aligning the aims of builders and NPSOT into a common purpose which optimizes quality of life for all citizens in Williamson County.

Congratulations, Hella!
MG Tour of UT’s Brackenridge Field Laboratory

On Nov. 22, 2008, a pleasant fall day, eight Master Gardeners enjoyed a field trip of Brackenridge Field Laboratory lead by Kay McMurry, PhD, Lecturer in UT's School of Biological Sciences. The Brackenridge Field Laboratory occupies a unique position as an urban field laboratory and is essential to UT's top-ranked biology program.

The tour wandered through several diverse ecosystems, visited greenhouses, ponds, and a butterfly house and even saw the somewhat rare native ground orchid, Spiranthes magnicamporum! Thanks again to Kay who made the visit possible.

Ila Falvey
I have recently become hooked on garden blogs. The problem is when you are in one there are links to more and then links to even more. Before you know it hours have passed and you still have more blogs to read. So I'm just going to pass along a few I really enjoyed visiting:

http://www.zanthan.com/gardens/gardenlog/
http://www.penick.net/digging/
http://suburbanwildlifegarden.blogspot.com/

Take a visit and read how other gardeners are coping with their plant addictions and other gardening dilemmas and joys.

If any of you have a garden blog I would LOVE to hear about it!

Happy Holidays!
Rebecca Matthews

Garden Trivia:
If caterpillars are seen in late fall, predict a mild winter.

In Closing:
No two gardens are the same. No two days are the same in one garden. ~ Hugh Johnson
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