

# Concho Valley Horticulture Update

November 2019

## Cool Season Herbs

We've already had a bit of winter weather, and soon the warm season annuals and perennials need to be cleaned up for the season. But the start of winter doesn't have to mean gardening is over until spring, there are plenty of things to grow this time of year. It's perfect weather to plant trees and shrubs, there are cool season vegetables to grow like carrots, kale, broccoli and spinach, beautiful winter flowers like pansies and snapdragons, and it's also prime time to grow cool season herbs.

Herbs are wonderful to have in the landscape because besides just looking nice for curb appeal they also can be used to make food more delicious. Herbs can help with goals for healthier eating, because they add flavor and can jazz up recipes without using as much fat and salt. And it's fun to make food with something you grew yourself!

Cool season herbs like cilantro and parsley are happiest when planted in the fall and grown through the cooler winter months; many people try to grow them in the spring and are disappointed when they fade and dwindle in the summer heat. Evergreen herbs like rosemary, sage, thyme, oregano stay going all year long and winter doesn't slow them down. Some herbs are only somewhat evergreen and will keep going unless there's a really hard freeze, such as mint, lavender and chives.

Many of the popular, commonly used herbs are easy to grow and well adapted to the local climate. Most of them do best in full sun and need well drained soil, but mint is an exception and can take some shade and soggy soil. If soil is heavy and compacted, most herbs will perform better if the soil is loosened up and amended with compost to improve drainage.

Many herbs also do well in containers, and can even be grown inside during the winter; basil is an indispensable culinary herb for many, but cannot live through the winter outside. To grow it inside, find a spot with the brightest light – about 6 hours of sun per day and plant in a container with a tray to catch excess water. But don't keep it on a windowsill when it's cold outside, it needs temperatures the 70's and the air next to windows gets colder than the rest of the room.

## November To-Do's

- Drain fuel from mower and other lawn equipment, or add a fuel stabilizer
- Plant trees and shrubs
- Utilize fallen leaves as mulch or add to compost bin
- Plant spring bulbs

## Pecan Update



We will be conducting the annual Concho Valley Pecan show on Friday, December 6th. Entries will be accepted until noon on Wednesday, December 4th. This is a great way to learn what variety of pecans you may have and to receive information on growing pecans in our area.

For details on how to enter, contact the extension office at 325-659-6528

## Ornamental Grasses

Ornamental grasses are popular additions to commercial and home landscapes. They can be particularly good for west Texas landscapes because there are some very tough varieties that are drought tolerant and can handle hot temperatures.

Grasses can provide a very unique aesthetic element to the landscape – they have very upright, vertical leaves with feathery seed heads that provide a natural, peaceful look. As grasses sway in the breeze, the movement draws interest and attention. Ornamental grasses can be successfully incorporated into just about any kind of landscape design, but work particularly well with rock gardens, dry creek beds and drought tolerant designs. They look very striking against evergreen shrubs, and even in the winter when they go dormant and turn brown they still hold their shape and keep a nice architectural aspect.

Many ornamental grasses are perennial, but some are annual. Purple fountain grass is a good example of a beautiful annual grass, and is best re-planted each spring. But for those wishing to try overwintering it, dig it up and pot it up just before the first fall frost, prune down to about 12 inches, and store in a protected area that stays above freezing (such as a garage). Replant after the last spring frost, around April.

Perennial grasses do well when planted in spring but can also be planted in the fall. Some nice small to medium sized options would include feathertop grass, little bluestem, 'Blonde Ambition' blue grama, little bluestem, and the state grass of Texas – sideoats grama.

Some larger ornamental grasses options include maiden grass, zebra grass, gulf coast muhly and pink flamingo muhly. Then the very large pampas grass is a popular landscape plant, but make sure there is plenty of room as it can grow up to ten feet tall and six feet wide.

Some grasses may need to be thinned out after a few years. If they spread out too far, dig and divide to get back into place. Dig up the whole plant, cut the clump into halves or thirds, and replant one section. Share the rest with a friend or plant elsewhere in the yard.

Ornamental grasses should not be cut right after they freeze in the fall. Not only because they still provide interest because they keep their structure, but many will perform better if the old winter-killed growth isn't cut off until early spring when new leaves just start to come back from the ground.

## Plant Spotlight

### Green Magic Broccoli

*Brassica oleracea* 'Green Magic'

This Texas Superstar designated broccoli is a superb early variety that produces high quality, attractive smooth dome heads with tight green beads.





## Pecans

San Angelo seems like one big pecan orchard, there are so many pecan trees in the older neighborhoods. While they are not drought tolerant and need attentive maintenance to stay healthy and make a good crop, pecans are very popular in the Concho Valley. They make beautiful shade trees for the landscape and also make a delicious nut to enjoy - not just in desserts but also as a healthy snack and in savory dishes. Visit the website [americanpecan.com](http://americanpecan.com) to find out more of the health benefits of pecans, as well as some delicious recipes to try that go beyond the traditional pecan pie.

November is the month for harvesting, and the other tasks for pecan tree care normally include watering and pruning if needed. As it cools down, pecan trees use less water than during the growing season, but they will still need a thorough rainfall or irrigation about once per month during dormancy. If there is a dry spell in the winter, trees may need a deep watering once or twice before spring.

For those that would like to add a nice landscape shade tree to the yard, fall is a great time of year for planting trees; some of the recommended varieties include Pawnee, Hopi, Sioux and Wichita – these will do well in the Concho Valley. Pecans perform best in deep, well-drained soil that is weed-free around the tree. Remove all vegetation and apply mulch to help keep weeds at bay for newly planted trees to establish quickly.

We will be conducting the annual Concho Valley Pecan Show on Friday, December 6th at the Tom Green County Extension Office. The pecan show is a chance to have pecans judged for quality and compete with other entries for ribbons.

Anyone who grows pecans is welcome to enter the show and there is no entry fee, for more details on how to enter visit <https://tomgreen.agrilife.org/horticulture/> and click on the Pecan Show link. For more info, please contact the Extension Office at 325-659-6522.

## How to Make Compost

Many gardeners, even beginners, know to do some planning ahead when planting a vegetable garden or shrub/flower bed. They will research what plants to get, and probably try to find out what fertilizer is best and how often to water. But a step that often gets overlooked, even by experienced gardeners sometimes, is the importance of improving the soil first. The soil quality has a major impact on the health of plants, and soil needs to be improved with the addition of organic matter before planting (except for native, desert plants that prefer 'lean' soil such as cacti and agaves).

Remember the phrase 'compost once, mulch forever.' The addition of compost to a planting bed improves the water holding capacity, aeration and drainage, nutrient availability, and more. Whenever a new bed or garden is planned, be sure to include the addition of three inches deep of compost to be tilled in before planting. For existing beds, the regular replenishment of a plant-based mulch will also provide a good source of organic matter and provide a similar benefit, just at a slower pace.

Compost can be purchased from nurseries and garden centers, but it's a good idea to have a compost bin or pile in the service area of the home landscape – an out of the way spot that isn't a focal point or easily seen. That way the valuable organic matter waste that comes from the home and landscape doesn't end up in a landfill and can be used to do a lot of good for the plants.

Microbes are what do the work of breaking down organic matter into good compost, so to get high quality compost quickly, keep the microbes happy. They need oxygen, water and the right balance of nitrogen and carbon. So a compost bin needs to have open sides to allow air flow to provide oxygen, if it gets dry it needs to be watered, and to provide the good balance of carbon and nitrogen just add the right plant-based waste materials.

High carbon materials are nicknamed 'browns' and are things like fallen leaves and twigs - things that are tougher and slower to decompose. High nitrogen materials have softer tissue, and are things like grass clippings and fruit and vegetable scraps. With Thanksgiving and Christmas coming up, there will be some good scraps to go into a compost bin along with the falling leaves from trees. Don't place dairy, meat or fats into the compost - they attract varmints; but good additions would include washed egg shells, coffee grounds, potato peelings, and fruit and vegetable scraps and peelings.

## Late Fall Gardening

It seems like cooler temperatures are here to stay, and it's time to get started on cool season landscaping chores. Now that we aren't seeing any more 90 degree days, it's a great time to plant cool season annual flowers like pansies, stock, snapdragons, cyclamen, Johnny jump ups, and foliage plants like ornamental cabbage, kale and swiss chard.

When planting annual color, the biggest bang for the buck comes when planting in small groupings instead of spreading the flowers out through a bed. Plant several flowers close together in a few areas of a flower bed, or plant several together in a container for the most color pop and impact.

Another fall landscape job is dealing with falling leaves. It may be a pain to have to clean them up, but leaves are a good source of organic matter for the yard. Try to mimic mother nature's system of recycling organic matter instead of bagging up leaves to throw away. Use leaves as mulch for beds and vegetable gardens, or place in a compost bin to break down for future use.

When trees go dormant it will be a good time of year for any necessary pruning, except wait just a little longer for oak trees. December or January is a better time for oaks in order to prevent the potential spread of oak wilt disease, which can be spread to fresh cuts by an insect- but the insect goes dormant in the winter. Another exception would be trees that flower in the early spring like red-buds and Texas mountain laurels - wait until they finish flowering before pruning, or most of the flowers will be lost.

We're lucky to have pretty mild winters in Texas (even though there is always some very cold, extreme weather it's usually fairly short lived) and are able to have a vegetable garden going year round. After warm season vegetables like tomatoes and squash freeze, replace them with cool season vegetables like lettuce, spinach, carrots, beets, turnips, cabbage, broccoli, kale, swiss chard and radishes.

Whether planting flowers, vegetables or shrubs, always consider improving the soil first. If soil is hard to work in and plants don't seem to thrive, incorporate some organic matter. For plants to be healthy and attractive, they need healthy root systems. And for roots to be happy, our soil usually needs a bit of intervention by the gardener. A good finished compost or well-rotted manure will help a lot.

## Efficient Winter Watering

It started out as quite a rainy year and it was wonderful to get so much precipitation. But then it stopped suddenly, and late summer got really hot and dry causing quite a bit of plant stress. We haven't had a lot of fall rain either, so irrigation will be needed for some plants to make it through the winter.

Though our water reservoirs and resources are in pretty good shape, it's as important as ever to conserve. One big way to have a positive impact on water resources is to be careful with water use in the yard. Now that it's cooling down and we're going into winter, it's a lot easier to conserve water and plants won't need as much. But dormant plants still need some moisture, so if it's a dry winter they will still need a little occasional irrigation - and we still need to be efficient and conserve as much water as possible.

For those with automatic sprinklers, this is a good time of year to evaluate the system and make water conserving improvements. It's best to get going during the 'off season' and not wait until spring when irrigation contractors get busy. There are several practices to adopt in landscape irrigation to reduce water use, as well as improve plant health.

First, convert to drip irrigation for all planting beds such as perennial, shrub or vegetable beds. Drip irrigation is much more water efficient than sprinklers, which can lose a lot of water to evaporation. It's also a better choice for plant health.

For lawns with spray heads, do a little sprinkler system audit. Check that sprinkler heads are facing the right direction, and check the droplet size that is being sprayed - small droplets that come out as a fine mist will evaporate very quickly. High pressure can cause misting, while lowering water pressure can increase droplet size and reduce water waste.

Replenish mulch in planting beds to a depth of four inches. This will help protect roots from freezing weather, and also improves water conservation on sunny, warmer days by preventing evaporation.

Utilize the website [watermyyard.org](http://watermyyard.org) to help determine how long to run the sprinkler system based on how much water plants actually need based on evapotranspiration measured locally.

# Upcoming Events

November 2019

Saturday, November 2, 10:00am to 12:00pm

## **Pumpkin Fest**

**Location:** Tom Green 4-H Center, 3168 N US Highway 67, San Angelo (next to animal shelter)

Hosted by the People/Plant Connection; Join us for fall pumpkin fun! See attached flyer, for more info call Susan at 325-656-3104

Thursday, November 7, 2:00pm-4:00pm

## **Green Thumb Seminar—Using Fresh Rosemary for the Holidays**

**\*\*NEW\*\* Location: People/Plant Connection: 416 South Oaks St., San Angelo**

Cost: \$20

Speaker: Susan Stanfield

Hosted by the People/Plant Connection; Attendees will get to make a rosemary wreath to take home and decorate for the holidays. To RSVP, call Susan at 325-656-3104

Friday, November 15, 12:00pm

## **Lunch N Learn Class - Earth-Kind Landscaping**

**\*\*NEW\*\* Location: People/Plant Connection: 416 South Oaks St., San Angelo**

Cost: \$5

Speaker: Allison Watkins

Hosted by the People/Plant Connection; Become an Earth-Kind gardener by learning how to reduce the use of fertilizer, pesticides and water. For more info call Susan at 325-656-3104

Save the date:

Concho Valley Pecan Show

Friday, December 6th; deadline to enter is 12pm December 4th. For more info on how to enter, contact the Extension Office at 325-659-6528

For more information on any of the topics, or to ask questions please contact:



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