

Concho Valley Horticulture Update

February 2020

Pruning Trees

Now is the time of year many homeowners want to work on tree pruning. Though pruning can technically be done any season, the dormant winter is most appropriate for pruning shade trees - before they use up stored food to develop new growth in the spring. But exceptions to this guideline would be trees that flower in the early spring, like redbuds; wait until after they finish flowering to prune. And evergreens like pines and junipers should be pruned in spring - before candles form on pines, and around early May for junipers (though evergreens generally need little to no pruning).

Winter is also a good time of year specifically for oaks because of the potential spread of oak wilt disease. Oak wilt can be spread several ways - root grafts, contaminated tools, and a tiny insect called the nitidulid beetle. The beetle can potentially spread the disease through wounds like pruning cuts, but the insect is dormant in the winter making it less likely. A backup plan is to paint the pruning cuts with spray paint, which is recommended any time pruning is done when the beetle is active but is also a good move during the winter as a double measure of protection. With the warm, mild winter we have had spraying pruning cuts of oaks trees is definitely recommended. Tools should be sterilized with rubbing alcohol or 10% bleach solution between trees.

The first goal of pruning should be to remove dead, damaged or broken limbs. After that, consider the form of the tree and check branch angles - wide angles are stronger, while narrow angles and branches growing close together are weak and have greater chances of failure. Make carefully planned removal or reduction cuts to promote good tree structure and strength. Branch attachments should have a 2:1 ratio, meaning the smaller branch diameter should be half as wide as the larger branch it's attached to. This kind of training for good branch angles and ratios is much more effective when started on young trees, rather than trying to correct large mature trees. Try to not to cut branches with a diameter greater than six inches.

Pruning should not be thought of as a 'one-time-fix' job that can immediately transform a tree into the right shape, but as a gradual process of maintaining tree health and structure. Avoid 'lion tailing' trees, which is easy to do to large tall shade trees. Thinning out the interior of the canopy (the branches that are easier to reach), and leaving tufts of leaves and small branches at the end will damage the health and structure of the tree.

February To-Do's

- Plant cool season annuals
- Apply pre-emergent herbicide
- Plant and/or prune rose bushes
- Water 24 to 48 hours before predicted hard freezes to protect plants
- Run irrigation system check
- Prune shade trees and shrubs as needed
- Check mowers and other lawn equipment; sharpen mower blades, get tune-up if needed

Pecan Update



Congratulations to all our pecan show winners!

We had several growers in the area place at the regional pecan show held earlier this month in College Station. They will continue on to the state pecan show in July, held in San Marcos. To see the regional show results visit

<https://tomgreen.agrilife.org/>

Thinning Fruit Trees

Thinning fruits and vegetables can be hard for a home gardener to do but is important for good production. When starting vegetables from seed, we just scatter them down the rows – depending on the crop, it's not always feasible to plant each seed in the exact right spot with the correct spacing. So after the seeds germinate, it's important to pull the extra plants that are growing too close. If you don't they won't get as big or productive as they should.

Some fruit trees also need to be thinned - such as peaches, plums, and apples. And the sooner it's done, the better. Not all fruit need it, pomegranates, blackberries, figs etc should not be thinned.



Thin out young fruit before it's the size of a dime. Stone fruit like peaches should be thinned out and spaced about 4 to 6 inches between fruits. Simply pick off and throw away the fruit along the

branches, leaving only one for every 6 inches or so. For apples, remove excess fruit leaving one or two fruit per cluster.

There are two major reasons for thinning fruit trees - for the health of the tree, and for better quality fruit. If all

the fruit is left on the tree, it will take up a lot of energy and nutrients and can stress the tree. It will also weigh down the branches, so much that they can even break and fall off.

Thinning also improves the fruit that is left. If not thinned, the fruit is much smaller. If you thin out the branches, the remaining fruit is large and sweet and better quality.

It may seem like you're losing fruit, but you will still end up with the same total weight of fruit - you won't have as many, but they will be larger. Don't wait too long, and get the thinning done as soon as you see fruit on the trees, which will start early in spring.



Before thinning



After thinning

Plant Spotlight

Bay Laurel

Laurus nobilis

A bay tree is a lovely addition to the landscape, providing handsome evergreen foliage that provides season long interest. And it's great for those that like to cook— to always have a source of bay leaves on hand. Bay laurel is drought tolerant, needs good drainage, and does best with some afternoon shade in the summer. It is considered only marginally cold hardy, so plant in a location that gives protection from cold fronts.



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Greek Laurel, *Laurus nobilis*

Winter Vegetables

It has been a warm winter and there's no telling what February and March will bring; it's safe to say it's too early to plant tomatoes and warm season crops though. But now is a great time to plant some cool season vegetables. Crops like swiss chard, spinach, carrots, lettuce and kale can handle cold temperatures and many are also attractive additions to the landscape. So don't miss out on the chance to grow some tasty leafy greens and root crops, it will start to get hot soon and early February is the end of the optimal planting window to start these winter vegetables.

It might be fun to try something new and different such as kohlrabi! Many of the winter vegetables are actually in the same plant family – Brassicaceae or mustard family. They are often called cole crops and include arugula, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, collards, kale, kohlrabi, mustard, bok choy, broccoli, radish and turnips. Some are more challenging to grow like cauliflower, while others are very easy – like kohlrabi. Small, tender kohlrabi bulbs can be used fresh - sliced up in salads or diced and added as a crunchy addition to dip. Larger bulbs can be used in soup or stew. Another less common crop, bok choy, is also easy to grow and makes a tasty addition to stir fry or salad.

Many of these can be found to purchase as transplants or seeds at local nurseries and garden centers, and the others can be found online and in seeds catalogs. The key to getting seeds to germinate well is to plant in well-prepared soil that is smooth and fine-textured, not clumpy and rocky. The addition of compost will improve the soil and can aid in plant growth.

Seeds also require a steady supply of water to germinate, and must be kept constantly damp until the plants emerge and begin to grow roots. This may mean a light sprinkling with water several times a day at first. After the seeds are up and/or the transplants are planted, a three-inch deep layer of mulch will help keep weeds out and conserve water.

Other good vegetables besides cole crops to plant right now include lettuce, leeks, carrots, swiss chard, beets, onions, potatoes, and asparagus.

For more info on growing these and other vegetable crops, visit the website <https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/vegetable/> and click on the 'Easy Gardening' link. Information includes crop specific growing instructions, recommended varieties, planting diagrams, pest management, and more.

Patio Color

It's been a very spring-like winter temperature wise, but there will still be some cold snaps before spring hits for good. There is still time to enjoy cool season color enjoy on the porch or patio. Many landscape plants are dormant and brown, but having a few large planters around the outside of the home will really kick up the curb appeal, and will be nice to enjoy on the warmer days when it feels good sit outside.

There are several really good winter annuals like pansies, stock, larkspur, alyssum and snapdragons. Cyclamen is another great winter annual. Cyclamen from a garden center, not a florist, will do well in outside planters.

Cyclamen comes in various shades of pink, red and white. So if you want to give someone some flowers for valentine's day, consider some garden cyclamens that can be enjoyed for months. They will be able to handle cold temperatures down to about the high 20's, so if a hard freeze comes they should be protected.

Dianthus, also called pinks, are another good flower for winter patio color. They are generally considered annuals, but in conditions that are just right they may come back as a perennial. Dianthus comes in different shades of pink and white, and will bloom through the rest of the winter into the spring until it gets hot.

When planting patio pots, you can make some stunning flower displays if you use different sizes and shapes of plants. Remember the term 'thrillers, fillers and spillers.' Plant one thing in the center that draws attention, the add filler plants and spiller plants to go down the sides of the pot like the alyssum.

Always use a potting mix for container plants, don't buy a bag labeled garden soil or use soil dug from the ground. Potting mix is peat moss based, and real soil turns hard like a brick when used in pots.

Get Ready for Spring Lawn Care

There are lots of winter weeds up right now; if you have an abundance of henbit and other cool season annual weeds, mark the calendar for next fall to apply pre-emergent. There's not much to do for winter weeds right now, and as soon as it gets hot again they will fade away. So don't worry too much about them at this point – just mow them down and focus on getting ready for spring. While pre-emergent won't fix the problem of weeds already up, now is a good time to apply it to prevent spring weeds from popping up. Only use pre-emergent on well-established landscapes, not where new plants will be planted or seeds will be sown in the next few months, and always read and follow all label directions.

Also keep in mind that a dense, thick, healthy lawn is the best defense against weeds. It's not so much that weeds come in and ruin the lawn, it's that weeds are more able to pop up in lawns that are already stressed and thinned out. So focus on rehabilitating the lawn and getting a good stand of turfgrass established and that will greatly reduce the number of weeds that grow.

The practices that have the biggest impact on keeping a lawn thick and healthy are proper mowing and irrigation. Frequent mowing at the correct height (about 0.5 inch for hybrid bermudagrass, 1 inch for common bermudagrass, and 2.5 inches for St. Augustine), and mowing often enough so that no more than 1/3 of the height of the grass is removed at once will have a big impact on improving turfgrass density and appearance.

Irrigation should be deep and infrequent – meaning water deeply when needed but don't water too often. A general rule of thumb is to apply one inch of water once per week when it's hot in the summer time and every two to three weeks in the spring and fall when it's cooler (but not at all if it has rained that week, of course). To find out how long to water to get one inch, set out some catch cans (or even some clean empty tuna cans) and water until an inch is measured in the cups. Lawns that are watered too frequently, or more than once per week, have shallow root systems and are not able to make it through the hot, dry summer weather. Deep-rooted grass will be much better and surviving the summer heat and also help conserve water.

Replenish Mulch

Right now is a good time of year to take a look at shrub and flower beds to see if mulch needs to be replenished. It's nice to do it while it's cool outside, because carrying around those large bags and raking to spread it out can be hard work, but it's not so bad in cooler weather.

Mulch is just a layer of material covering the soil surface. It can be organic, such as shredded bark, wood chips, grass clippings, fallen leaves, and so on. Inorganic mulch would consist of things like rocks, shredded rubber, or plastic.

Mulch does several things for plants. First, it conserves moisture. Up to two-thirds of the water applied to shrubs can evaporate if un-mulched. Since water costs you money and is a vital resource, it makes sense to save it as much as possible.

Also, mulch shades the soil and helps moderate soil temperature. It can keep soil warmer in winter and cooler in summer. Mulch also reduces soil erosion in areas of bare soil.

One of the best reasons to use mulch is that it reduces weeds. Mulch shades out weeds and prevents them from sprouting. But to get the full benefit of mulch, it has to be deep enough – make sure the layer is three to four inches deep or there won't be much benefit. Don't go too deep or plant roots can suffocate.

The best type of mulch for most landscape uses is wood mulch. The type of wood doesn't really matter, choose what you like the look of—cypress, cedar, hardwood etc. Remember that it will break down over time and need to be added to every year or so; while it may sound like a bad thing, it's actually a great thing! As mulch breaks down, it decomposes into rich organic matter that loosens up the soil, adds nutrients, and improves the structure.

And last but not least, a great reason to use mulch is that it looks good. Adding mulch to all planting beds will bring them together aesthetically and make your whole yard look beautiful and complete.

Upcoming Events

February 2020

Thursday, February 6, 2:00pm-4:00pm

Finding Art in Nature—Liquid Leading ('stained glass' look)

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

Cost: \$25

Speaker: Susan Stanfield

Hosted by the People/Plant Connection; This is a new series being offered by the PPC; to RSVP, call Susan at 325-656-3104

Thursday, February 13, 2:00pm-4:00pm

West Texas Gardening 101—Rainwater Harvesting and Earth-Kind Landscaping

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

Cost: \$20

Speakers Susan Stanfield, Linda Rowe

Hosted by the People/Plant Connection; Learn about best practices for gardening in the Concho Valley. To RSVP, call Susan at 325-656-3104

Friday, February 21, 12:00pm

Lunch N Learn Class - Landscape Design for Home Safety

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

Cost: \$5

Speaker: Allison Watkins

Hosted by the People/Plant Connection; Learn how landscaping can be designed to make the home more secure and less appealing to criminals; also find out about fire resistant landscaping. For more info call 325-656-3104

February 29, 9:00am to 4:00pm

Turf, Trees and Tomatoes—the 3T's of Texas Horticulture

Location: Tom Green 4H Center, 3168 N. US Highway 67, San Angelo

Cost: \$30 (includes lunch)

Speakers: Dr. Chrissie Segars, Dr. Russ Wallace, Allison Watkins

Join us for a special seminar all about the gardening topics Texans love most! Find out how to be more successful with tomatoes and vegetable gardening, learn how to have a healthy lawn in west Texas, and discover tree care and pruning info. **Call to RSVP: 325-659-6522**

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



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