

# Concho Valley Horticulture Update

March 2020

## Efficient Landscape Irrigation

No matter what the weather has been like in any given season in west Texas, one thing is certain regarding landscape irrigation – water conservation is always vital. When we are blessed with rainy spells, it's still as important as ever to stay mindful of irrigation efficiency because we never know when it's going to dry up for a while – last year was a prime example of that. Not only do we need water to enjoy beautiful landscapes, we need water to live so it's important to be careful with how we water the yard.

Some fundamental components of efficient landscape irrigation include drip irrigation, a rain/freeze sensor, efficient spray nozzles, a knowledge of how to adjust an automatic time clock, and mulch. Drip irrigation is the best way to water plants because it applies the water slowly, directly to the soil so that it does not evaporate like spray irrigation. Not only does it save water when compared to spray irrigation, plants like it and most will perform better with drip. Plants absorb water best through the roots, so spraying leaves is unnecessary; and consistently spraying leaves can potentially increase fungal disease pressure. Drip irrigation can be a do-it-yourself project and with a little practice any homeowner can have the power to save water and keep plants irrigated without wasting water. Professional irrigators can also be hired to install drip systems.

Subsurface drip irrigation can be utilized for turfgrass as well, and can be a great choice but is a little more complicated than above-ground drip lines; it's worth looking into, especially for anyone starting from scratch with a new system. For those that have existing sprinkler systems or just want to stick with spray heads for the lawn, check out the various types of efficient sprinkler nozzles. One good example is multi-stream technology. Multi-stream sprinkler heads spray small jets of water, instead of droplets into the air. Multi-stream nozzles have a lower precipitation rate so they take a longer amount of time to water, but they use less water overall due to better uniformity and less evaporation (the smaller the droplet, the faster it evaporates).

It's distressing to see sprinkler systems running during or right after a nice long, heavy rainfall. A rain/freeze sensor can help prevent this from happening, and is fairly inexpensive and simple to add to an existing system. If you have an automatic system with a timer, practice changing it and learn all the details of how it works. Control the irrigation timer, don't let the irrigation timer control you! Finally, three to four inches of wood mulch in all planting beds and even in potted plants can help with water conservation; it also looks attractive and adds a finishing touch to the yard.

## March To-Do's

- Divide summer and fall flowering perennials and ornamental grasses
- Avoid purchasing bare-root trees and roses this late in the season - instead choose container grown or B&B
- Prepare soil in new beds by tilling in 3 inches of compost
- Don't plant frost-sensitive plants too early. The last frost in the Concho Valley can be as late as mid April, but is usually mid-to late-March

## Pecan Update



Spring is a good time to start fertilizing. Once leaves emerge and the tree is actively growing, apply nitrogen fertilizer. If you'd like a good crop of pecans, applying zinc is very beneficial - apply any time there is new growth in the leaves. Start at bud break; Zinc must be applied as a foliar spray, and is not absorbed well through the soil.

## Establishing a New Lawn

A healthy lawn is not only visually appealing but also functional. A nice lawn improves curb appeal and increases property value but is also enjoyable for everyday living from spring through fall. A thick carpet of turfgrass makes a great play space for kids and pets, and creates a very pleasant atmosphere for entertaining and even just lounging and enjoying fresh air on a nice day.

It is important to ensure that lawns in west Texas are cared for in a water-efficient way, with proper irrigation that doesn't waste water, because it is easy to unintentionally over-water lawns or lose water through irrigation systems that are not very efficient. But with some effort and knowledge, lawns have a place in a well-designed landscape, and can be healthy and water-efficient even in west-Texas!

Here are some tips for establishing a new lawn – whether for a new construction home, filling in bare spots of an existing lawn, or renovating and redoing an existing lawn. First is timing – sod can be planted technically any time of year, but spring is best. Warm-season grass seed germinates better in warmer temperatures so don't be too hasty to start seed. Wait until around May when soil warms up.

A well-prepared site or planting bed is important because it increases the success rate of getting turfgrass

established. It also helps create a lawn that is more drought-tolerant, by encouraging deeper roots. First, clear out all debris - weeds, rocks, etc. Then till the ground to loosen and aerate the soil, making it easier for roots to grow through.

Planting can be done in several different ways. While some grasses can be seeded, like common bermudagrass or buffalograss, St. Augustine and many hybrid bermuda varieties are only available as sod. For instant impact, purchase squares or rolls of sod and lay it right onto the prepared soil surface, creating an instant lawn. Plugging and sprigging are also options but require more time before the lawn fills in.

Whether planting seeds or sod, irrigate frequently and lightly at first, then slowly reduce the frequency when roots become well established but water deeper each time. Once the lawn is established, the key to good irrigation is 'deep but infrequent.' For fertilization, a good first step is to do a soil test through Texas A&M University – see the website [soiltesting.tamu.edu](http://soiltesting.tamu.edu). That will give a recommendation on what nutrients are needed, but usually nitrogen is the main concern.

[Click here](#) for a more in-depth guide for establishing new turfgrass.

## Plant Spotlight

### Mystic Spires Salvia

*Salvia longispicata* x *farinacea* 'Mystic Spires Blue'

This beautiful perennial is named a 'Texas Superstar' by Texas A&M. It flowers freely through the entire growing season, mixes nicely in beds with other perennials and is very heat tolerant. Mystic Spires grows about 18 to 30 inches tall, blooms best in full sun and prefers well drained soil. Available at the Master Gardener Plant Sale this year!





## Earth-Kind Soil Management

Soil quality has a huge impact on landscaping and gardening success, because it dictates water holding capacity and drainage, nutrient availability, etc. Soil is a complex, crucial part of gardening that requires some consideration but is often overlooked. Texas A&M has developed “Earth-Kind” landscaping techniques to help gardeners enjoy gardening, while also protecting the environment and natural resources; there are many components to Earth-Kind landscaping, and a good foundation to start with is Earth-Kind soil management.

Well managed soil can reduce or even eliminate the need for fertilizers in many landscape scenarios. Overuse of fertilizers is harmful to the environment, and the first step to fertilize correctly is to simply do a soil test through Texas A&M. Many homeowners apply fertilizer on a set schedule, but if there are already enough nutrients in the soil, additional nutrients are unnecessary. Visit <http://soiltesting.tamu.edu/> and use the “Urban Soil Submittal Form” to send in a soil sample. The report may indicate that no fertilizer is needed, or if some is needed the report will show specifically what nutrients to apply and how much.

Another important but simple aspect of good soil management is the incorporation of compost any time new plants are added. Till or dig up the beds and add three inches of organic matter, then mix it in as deep as possible. Organic matter will improve drainage, aeration, nutrient absorption, and soil structure. There are many good options for plant-based organic matter, ranging from composted cotton bur hulls, composted farm manure, bagged compost from a nursery or garden center, or homemade compost made in the backyard from yard scraps like fallen leaves and grass clippings. Be sure to only incorporate fully decomposed organic matter, or finished compost; otherwise it can tie up nutrients instead of providing nutrition. Overtilling can be damaging to soil structure, so don’t re-till the soil every season. But when starting a new bed or garden, the addition of compost will improve soil quality.

After planting, keep a three- to four-inch-deep layer of organic mulch maintained in the beds. Organic mulch, like shredded hardwood or cedar mulch will provide many benefits to the plants such as conserving water, moderating soil temperature, and preventing weeds. As time goes by, it will slowly break down and decompose into additional organic matter that will continue to improve soil. Just remember the phrase “compost once, mulch forever” and replenish mulch every year as it shrinks.

## Growing Herbs



This has been quite a year for roller-coaster weather. But even though Texas weather is unpredictable, soon it will be the season for planning and planting to spruce up the landscape. Culinary herbs are a wonderful addition to any home landscape, since many are beautiful, hardy and tough plants that can make food taste more delicious.

Many of the popular, commonly used herbs are easy to grow and are well adapted to the local climate. So, try a few herbs in the landscape this spring – you don’t need a separate, designated herb garden to have good herb production, just use them in flower beds like other perennials and annuals.

Most herbs 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 with potting mix as long as the pot has good drainage.

Some of the recommended herbs for the area include evergreens like sage, rosemary, thyme, oregano, mint, marjoram and chives; warm season annuals like basil, parsley, dill, cilantro, and perennials like catnip, catmint, fennel, lemon balm, Mexican mint marigold, lemon verbena, and lemon grass.

Besides culinary use, there are other benefits that come from growing herbs – many are good for pollinators like bees and butterflies, some are good for craft projects, and most are deer-resistant.

Check out the Master Gardener Plant on April 4th where several herbs will be available, including African Blue Basil—a popular basil that is great for aesthetic as well as culinary value.

## Spring Insects

There are often many questions in the spring about how to control insect pests of the landscape and garden. First, know that correct identification is the first step – there are beneficial insects out there too, and not every insect is a pest. Some homeowners find themselves with a worse problem after applying insecticides than before, due to either applying the wrong product or over applying insecticides in general. Everything in nature is a complex balance, and if excessive use of insecticides kills populations of beneficial insects, pests can become even more numerous or new pests can emerge that weren't a problem before.

For those insects that are causing damage to plants, they need to be identified before a control strategy can be implemented. Contact the Extension Office for help identifying insects, and for control recommendations.

Fire ants are always a popular topic, as everyone loves to hate the red imported fire ant. Visit the website <http://fireant.tamu.edu> to get the most up-to-date information on controlling fire ants in the yard. An insect growth regulator such as methoprene (trade name Extinguish) is a good way to control fire ants without damaging other insects.

Mosquitos are also a major nuisance, and in recent years have become a serious health threat because they can be vectors for human disease. Be sure to not have any standing water in the yard, especially small containers. Protect yourself by wearing long sleeves and pants when working outside, and apply a good mosquito repellant to reduce the risk of mosquito-transmitted diseases.

Pollinators (mostly bees, but also butterflies and others) are beneficial insects, and are crucial for vegetables and fruit trees to produce a crop. If vegetable plants have flowers but they don't turn into fruit, a lack of pollinator insects could be the problem. Try planting pollinator-friendly plants such as bee balm, salvia, and milkweed. Also, be very careful with insecticides and avoid using them if possible. If needed, use products that are not broad-spectrum and apply only where needed, keeping beneficial insects in mind.

## Tomato Tips

Tomatoes are the most popular vegetable for a home garden, but are not the easiest crop to grow. Here are some tips to help you get the most out of your tomato endeavors. First, be sure to plant in full sun. Next, improve soil by adding organic matter. Just till up the area to be planted, and incorporate compost to get a healthy start before putting in the plants. Or for pots, use a nutrient rich potting mix.

Next is variety selection. This is very important in areas that are prone to common diseases, and if you have dealt with disease problems in the past. The letters that follow a variety name stand for the diseases that it's resistant to. The more letters, the more disease resistance. At the very least, check for VFN after the name - this means it's resistant to verticillium wilt, fusarium wilt, and nematodes.

Also choose based on heat tolerance. For example, Phoenix, Sun Master, Heatwave and Tycoon are good varieties to try in our hot weather. Also, small varieties and cherry tomatoes produce better in the hot Texas weather than large varieties.

It will soon be time to plant transplants directly outside, so purchase large transplants from your local nursery. Starting with the largest plant possible will mean lots of production before it gets too hot. Transplants will get the best start if planted on a cloudy day or late in the afternoon. Also, keep them protected from wind and extreme temperatures for the first week.

Vegetables grow best with light, frequent applications of fertilizer and with steady, even irrigation. Keep the garden weeded to prevent competition for nutrients and water. If you pay a little attention to the garden every day, it won't be a ton of work but if it's left to get overgrown with weeds it can be very frustrating and difficult to manage.





# Upcoming Events

March 2020

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**

Thursday, March 19, 2:00pm-4:00pm

## **Finding Art in Nature—Sugar Eggs**

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

Cost: \$25

Speaker: Susan Stanfield

Hosted by the People/Plant Connection; to RSVP, call Susan at 325-656-3104

Thursday, March 12, 2:00pm-4:00pm

## **West Texas Gardening 101—Plant Propagation**

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, March 27, 12:00pm

## **Lunch N Learn Class - The Moonlit Garden—Design for Evening Enjoyment**

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

Cost: \$5

Speaker: Allison Watkins

Hosted by the People/Plant Connection; Learn about landscape design for night time usage. For more info call 325-656-3104

*Save the Date:*

## **Master Gardener Plant Sale—Saturday April 4th, 8:00am until sold out.**

Location: **Tom Green 4H Building, 3168 N US Highway 67 (next to Animal Shelter)**

FMI call 325-659-6522 or visit [txmg.org/conchovalley](http://txmg.org/conchovalley)

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



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