

Concho Valley Horticulture Update

May 2020

Home Grown Fruits and Vegetables

The pandemic has greatly increased interest in home gardening – for two reasons, I think. First, social distancing has significantly reduced the types of activities many are used to, and gardening and landscaping are great pursuits to stay active and get fresh air while spending more time at home. Also, with the stockpiling of food and supplies that has been happening, and the limited accessibility of grocery stores, many are looking for ways to grow their own food and reduce the number of grocery store visits needed.

There are many ways to incorporate edible plants into the landscape, so even if you don't have a ton of space for a huge garden, it's not only possible but highly recommended to plant some vegetables, herbs and fruit in the yard. First, consider vegetables and herbs that can be planted now and will provide a pretty quick harvest. Also, take this opportunity to realize the advantage it is to have permanent edible plants in the yard, not just out of necessity but also for enjoyment even when grocery stores become easily accessible again.

Now is a great time to plant warm season vegetables; Texas A&M promotes the Earth-Kind method of gardening, to reduce the need for fertilizers, pesticides and water. Earth-Kind helps promote personal health and safety as well as the conservation of natural resources. In my opinion, some of the spring and summer vegetables that can best be grown in an Earth-Kind manner include okra, peppers, sweet potato, magda variety squash, and heat tolerant tomatoes. These can all take the heat of west Texas and will grow well without excessive inputs. Magda squash is a specific variety with a nice nutty flavor that is less prone to squash bug infestation (but not immune).

Five more Earth-Kind suited vegetable that are for the cool season and should be planted later in the fall or winter, include carrots, swiss chard, onions, spinach and asparagus. The herbs I recommend as the best Earth-Kind options and the most usable for cooking include sage, rosemary (dwarf varieties are recommended for smaller spaces), basil, chives, oregano, thyme, and mint. Parsley, garlic, and cilantro are great choices for fall/cool season planting.

Tim Hartmann, Texas A&M Extension Program Specialist – EarthKind, recently appeared on a Facebook Live video broadcast from the page 'Aggie Horticulture' to provide tips on growing fruit at home. While these options won't produce immediately and are more of an investment for the future, he said some of the easiest to grow fruits for Texas include Asian persimmon, fig, blackberry, pear (see tomgreenagrillife.org/horticulture for a list of recommended varieties), and grape (juice or jelly varieties, like champanel). I would also add that pomegranate is a good easy-to-grow fruit crop for west Texas.

May To-Do's

- Adjust irrigation schedule as needed as temperatures warm up
 - Visit the website watermyyard.org to receive weekly watering recommendations for sprinkler systems
- Replenish mulch around beds to conserve water and maintain plant health
- Plant summer vegetables such as okra, peppers, melons, squash, sweet potatoes, and blackeyed peas,

Pecan Update



Keep an eye out for pecan nut casebearers, a small moth that damages nuts in the spring. Join the Pecan Update email list to receive an announcement for the best time to spray.

Call 325-659-6522 to sign up

Garden Weed Control

Spring means storms in Texas, and storms can bring big rains. Heavy spring rainfall is great for landscape and garden plants (at least when it doesn't include hail), but it also increases weed growth. The storm on Easter weekend brought deep rain for many in the Concho Valley, but extra effort will be needed to keep weeds under control – weeds decrease vegetable garden production by competing for water, nutrients and light.

Herbicides are often thought of as the go-to option for controlling weeds, but while there are a few products that are labeled for vegetable gardens and can be used around edible crops, there is no silver bullet. There is no single herbicide that can be used on all vegetable crops to control all weeds. Extra care should be taken when using herbicides; labels must always be read and followed very carefully, especially for food production.

The old-fashioned methods like hoeing and mulch are still very useful and important for vegetable crops, and are the best bet for maintaining a healthy garden. If using herbicides, whether in the garden or the landscape, remember that post-emergent products are not very effective against fully-grown plants. They should be used when weeds are small and actively growing to have any effect.

Back to hoeing - weeds are easy to disturb in the seedling stage. Don't let weeds get out of control and grow large, because that becomes very frustrating and is a common cause for people to give up on vegetable gardening. Weed seedlings will pop up frequently if the garden is irrigated regularly or after a rainfall, so use a garden hoe to scrape or roughen up the soil when the small plants emerge – catch them early and they are easy to keep under control.

Mulch is the best bet for weed prevention around vegetables. Properly applied mulch reduces many weeds, but not all, so keep a 'plan B' for those that do come through it. Mulch must be deep enough for it to have an impact; a four-inch deep layer of organic mulch such as shredded tree limbs is recommended. Deeper than four inches can reduce oxygen infiltration into the soil and suffocate plant roots, so don't overdo it but mulch makes a huge difference.

And don't just focus on weeds in the garden itself, but keep the ground surrounding the garden tidy and free of weeds as well because they can be hosts for pests. Mow or weed eat frequently, or use mulch around the garden, to reduce insect and disease pests in the vegetables.

Plant Spotlight

Walker's Low Cat Mint

Nepeta 'Walker's Low'

The stellar perennial is a great choice for Concho Valley landscapes. It is as beautiful as it is tough, attracts bees and butterflies, and has a nice fragrance. It is related to catnip but does not affect cats. It is named for a garden in Ireland where it was discovered as an accidental hybrid, not growth habit; it does maintain a fairly neat form and grows about 2 feet tall and wide. Cut to the ground in February, and cut back old spent blooms throughout the season for maximum rebloom.



New “Texas Superstars”

Texas A&M has announced two new Texas Superstar plants this spring. Texas Superstars are plants that have been scientifically tested in research trials and proven to do well across the state. They may be old favorites or newly released varieties, and include annuals, perennials, shrubs, trees and specialty plants like vegetables and fruit.

The new plants to earn the designation include a petunia – ‘Tidal Wave Red Velour Spreading Petunia’ and several new types of purslane. ‘Cupcake,’ ‘Muffin,’ and ‘Rio Grande’ series purslane are all improved selections that have superior qualities over other purslane. David Rodriguez, Agrilife Extension Horticulturist in San Antonio said “All these new selections bloom better, longer and are more heat resistant. They represent all the best qualities you can find in purslane.” The three new purslane series offer several different colors and color combinations to choose from and are great choices to add a bright pop of color to the landscape. Purslane requires full sun and will do best in hot, dry conditions.



Cupcake Yellow Chrome and RioGrande Magenta purslane

As for the new petunia, Agrilife Research horticulturist Dr. Mike Arnold said, “Tidal Wave Red Velour’s combination of durability and toughness and the longer growing season than most petunias makes it a great Texas Superstar. We always look for combinations for bedding plants that will give contrast in landscapes, and this red is great for that. But it’s also a fantastic container plant because of its trailing habit that cascades over the container.” Petunias will bloom best in full sun, but partial shade would help them last longer through the summer.

These newly designated plants are annuals, but there are also some top-notch perennials on the Texas Superstar list as well, including Mystic Spires Blue Salvia, Moy Grande hibiscus, and New Gold lantana.

Good plant selection is so important for successful landscaping and gardening. Choosing plants that are known to do well in the local soil and climate will greatly improve success and reduce the need for pesticides and excessive labor to maintain the plants. See more Texas Superstars at texassuperstar.com, and also utilize other resources like the Earth-Kind plant selector at earth-kind.tamu.edu. Or just observe what does well in your neighbor’s yards and in local parks and gardens. After choosing good plants for the Concho Valley area in general, it’s also important to give them specifically what they want in the yard – for example sun vs shade, rich soil vs dry rocky soil.

Aerating the Lawn

Aeration is an important but often overlooked turf maintenance practice. Aeration is the use of a large mechanical device called an aerator to poke holes through turf and into the soil.

Plant roots need loose soil that has lots of oxygen to be healthy, but due to foot traffic and other factors, the soil can become heavy and tight like a brick. If you’ve ever had a plumbing line dug or irrigation system installed, you may have noticed how green and healthy the grass grew in over the dug areas. When soil is loosened up it is much easier for oxygen to infiltrate through to plant roots.

Using an aerator to loosen up the soil of a compacted lawn will create an environment that is easier for roots to grow in, and provides needed oxygen. Aerating can also help reduce thatch problems.

It’s best to use a core aerator rather than a spike aerator. A spike aerator is not very effective in clay soils, and a core aerator that actually removes a little of the soil creates room for the remaining soil to spread out and loosen up. Just be sure to flag all sprinkler heads and anything else in the lawn that you don’t want to get damaged by the machine.

Aeration isn’t necessary for most home lawns every year, but can really make a difference in older lawns with compacted soil, or new construction homes with soil compacted by equipment. Spring is a great time of year to aerate if you suspect your soil is compacted and would like to give the lawn a boost for healthier growth.



Plant Watermelon



Watermelon is an essential summer item. Sweet, cool watermelon is great at any cookout or picnic. If you'd like to try growing your own, now is a good time to get them planted if they haven't been yet. Large varieties take a long time to get to maturity.

We can grow really tasty watermelons in the Concho Valley because they do well with hot days and warm nights, and cooler temperatures can stunt the growth. So watermelon is a pretty reliable crop in our hot summers.

Even though they like it to be hot, they will still need reliable watering - watermelons are about 90% water and that water has to come from somewhere! Plant in well-drained soil - and if your soil is heavy like most around here is, amend with compost to improve drainage and texture. Or, try planting in a large raised bed.

They can be direct seeded, or you can purchase transplants or grow your own seeds indoors to transplant. Just be sure to harden them off by setting them in the sun and keep a close eye on them until they get toughened up against the heat and dry wind. When planting, leave lots of room because the plants will get very large and sprawl across a wide area.

Apply a nitrogen fertilizer at planting and then 3 weeks after emergence. Irrigate one to two inches of water every week. There are some insect pests that could possibly cause problems, such as whiteflies, mites, and armyworms. Use an insecticidal soap, or a vegetable garden safe pesticide such as Bt for caterpillars.

Keep weeds under control with mulch and irrigate on a steady schedule when there's no rain. Hail is very damaging to melons and squashes; when the plants get large it's hard to protect them, but while they are small they can be easily protected from a spring storm with a covering; so have a plan in place for new plants if storms come through.

Watermelons, like all cucurbits, have separate male and female flowers and rely on bee pollination to develop fruit. Be sure to protect local bee populations and be mindful of bees when considering pesticide applications. Plant pollinator-friendly plants like catmint, salvia, and lantana if bees don't frequent your vegetable garden.

Spring and Summer Plant Pests

As summer approaches, be prepared to monitor for insect pests and have a plan ready for the 'usual suspects.' Summer is hard enough on plants, with high temperatures and usually not much rainfall. Insect pests can make plant stress worse; but remember that not all insects are bad. Many insects are beneficial, and some that feed on plants don't do enough harm to warrant treatment with pesticides. So if you're not sure, bring a sample by the extension office for help identifying.

Some years grasshoppers come out with a bang, while other years they're not very problematic. One option for defense is to apply a barrier around the yard with carbaryl, trade name Sevin; even though they do jump, they also do a lot of crawling and a barrier will help keep them at bay.

Aphids are a very common pest and can affect just about any kind of plant, from trees to vegetables. They prefer cooler weather and tender new spring growth, but can be a problem during the summer too. Many of the common insecticides will help control them such as insecticidal soap, permethrin, imidacloprid or carbaryl. But the decision to treat should be based on the plant and level of infestation—for example, aphids will not usually stress a large shade tree, but can reduce productivity of vegetables.

Spider mites can be very hard to control, and really like hot, dusty weather. They live on the undersides of leaves which makes spraying them difficult. Frequent spraying with water or insecticidal soap can help; don't use carbaryl anywhere there has been a history of spider mites because it's not effective against them and can even make them worse.



Sonoran Tent Caterpillar

Caterpillars are frequent pests of landscape trees. There are many different types—this spring there were lots of calls regarding the Sonoran Tent Caterpillar, feeding on oak trees. They don't tend to do much damage so treatment is usually not necessary. In the early summer we will likely start seeing walnut caterpillars in pecan trees; Bt (an organic biological control) is very effective against caterpillars.

Remember that overdoing it with insecticides will likely cause pest infestations to become worse. There are many beneficial predators and parasitoids keeping things in balance, and they are sensitive to insecticides. When there are pests to control, use a very targeted approach—meaning properly ID the pest and choose the right product, and apply correctly. Utilize IPM (Integrated Pest Management) techniques and include mechanical, cultural and biological control measures before going straight to a pesticide.

Upcoming Events

May 2020



Due to the circumstances of COVID-19 and the need for social distancing, the May calendar continues to look quite different! Here are some great online educational opportunities, and be sure to follow the Facebook Page "[Tom Green County Horticulture](#)" for educational posts and updates on other online class opportunities

Thursday April 23 and 30

Pecan Tree Webinar

See attached flyer for details, register at <https://agriliferegister.tamu.edu/Pecan>

Every Tuesday and Thursday, 5pm

Texas A&M Agrilife Water University—Free Online Classes

Visit <https://wateruniversity.tamu.edu/events> for classes and topics, and to see the links to join live (not viewable later)

Every Wednesday and Friday, 1pm

Aggie Horticulture—Facebook Live video classes

Visit the [Aggie Horticulture Facebook Page](#) to participate live, or view any of the videos after the broadcast finishes (Facebook account NOT necessary)

WEST REGION PECAN PROGRAM

The Texas A&M Agrilife Extension Service is hosting a pecan program for homeowners and commercial producers who want to know more about managing their pecan trees. This program will be offered via distance learning and the cost of the program is \$10.00 per person.

Commercial Pecan Program

Thursday
April 23, 2020
10:00-11:30 AM

1 - IPM CEU Offered

Topics & Speakers

Early Season Fertility

Monte Nesbit
Extension Program Specialist II
Department of Horticultural Sciences
Texas A&M Agrilife Extension Service

Assessing Your Crop and Pollination Drop

Dr. Larry Stein
Professor & Extension Horticulturist
Texas A&M Agrilife Extension Service

Scouting Your Pecan Orchards for Pecan Diseases & Insects

Bob Whitney
Executive Director of the Texas Pecan Board

Homeowner Pecan Program

Thursday
April 30, 2020
10:00-11:30 AM

1 - CEU Offered

Topics & Speakers

Fertility & Water Management

Monte Nesbit
Extension Program Specialist II
Department of Horticultural Sciences
Texas A&M Agrilife Extension Service

Sunlight

Dr. Larry Stein
Professor & Extension Horticulturist
Texas A&M Agrilife Extension Service

Scouting Your Backyard for Pecan Disease & Insects

Bob Whitney
Executive Director of the Texas Pecan Board

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



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