

# Concho Valley Horticulture Update

July 2020

## Summer Landscaping Tips

Summer is the toughest time of year on most landscape plants (and we have a long summer!). The hot, dry weather creates a harsh environment, but with some knowledge and practice the home landscape can survive the summer; and can even look beautiful and be functional without wasting water or resources. Here are my top tips for successful landscaping in west Texas. First, give plants what they want. This might sound obvious, but it's the number one most important tip. And it's more about choosing the right plant to match local environment and conditions, instead of trying to change the environment to match a certain plant. Plant labels don't give much info, so it's important to choose carefully – ask for recommendations from local nurseries, use the plant selector tool at [Earth-Kind.tamu.edu](http://Earth-Kind.tamu.edu), and do some research to discover what plants will do well in the amount of sun, type of soil etc. in your yard. The zone number on the label only refers to winter hardiness, not heat tolerance or any of the other equally important considerations.

Train plants to have deeper roots. No matter how much you water, if plants have shallow roots they will suffer when it gets over 100 degrees. To encourage deep roots, prepare soil when planting new plants by loosening it up and incorporating compost. After they are established, gradually adjust irrigation timing until they are watered as infrequently as possible. Deep but infrequent irrigation promotes healthy, deep root systems and helps plants survive summer heat.

Turfgrass doesn't have to be an enemy to an Earth-Kind, water conserving landscape, but does require more effort and water than most other landscape plants – so consider limiting turfgrass to the minimum you need, and incorporate groundcover, perennials, hardscape and other landscape features. As I heard someone once say: "if the only time you walk on it is when you mow it, you probably don't need it."

Mulch makes a big difference all year round, but summer is when it really helps with water needs. A thick three- to four-inch deep layer of mulch will shade the soil, prevent water from, and reduce weeds; it truly helps plants endure heat.

When irrigating plants, be as efficient as possible – use drip irrigation everywhere you can, and make sure spray heads are not misting or misaligned and spraying the street. Do an in-depth irrigation audit each year to make sure the system is in good running order, and do a quick check every few weeks to observe it running to catch any obvious problems.

It might seem impossible to have a beautiful yard in west Texas without an enormous water bill, but it can be done! It might take a little more effort in the beginning, but a well-planned landscape can be low maintenance and drought tolerant as well as functional and attractive.

## July To-Do's

- Check melons and squash for ripeness
- Audit irrigation system to check for problems
- Pick okra, peas and peppers often to maintain production.
- Watch for summer pests like chinch bugs and spider mites

## Pecan Update



Keep an eye out for second generation pecan nut case-bearers—no treatment is likely needed for heavy crops, but light crops may warrant treatment.

Visit [pecankernel.tamu.edu](http://pecankernel.tamu.edu) for more info.

## Get a Thicker Lawn with Good Mowing

Lawns are an integral part of home landscapes but are not always easy to keep healthy in west Texas. Some of the key maintenance tasks to keep up with in the summer include fertilization, mowing and irrigation. Mowing is often overlooked in importance, but it plays a huge role in creating a dense turf cover - contributing to a beautiful, healthy weed-free lawn.

The Aggie Turf website from Texas A&M has a lot of great resources for lawn care, visit <https://aggieturf.tamu.edu/publications/> to see a list of topics. There is a fact sheet on mowing written by Extension turf specialist Dr. Becky Bowling titled

"Mowing Recommendations for Warm-Season Turfgrass." It has a lot of great info that can help get a lawn back in shape. The two big factors for good lawn mowing technique are height and frequency.

Mowing frequency is very much tied to mowing height. Never cut off more than 1/3 of the height of the grass - so the shorter the mowing height, the more often it needs to be mowed to stay healthy. Many homeowners only mow about twice a month, when weekly or even every 5 days would help keep the grass thicker and keep weeds out more effectively. See the chart below for the best mowing heights for the common species in Texas:

### ***Mowing Height Recommendations***

Correct mowing height and frequency contribute more than any other single factor to good turf density. Mow at the correct height often enough to remove no more than 1/3 of the height of the grass

Turf:	Recommended Height:	Mow when grass is this high:
Common bermuda	1.5" - 3"	2" - 4.5"
Hybrid bermuda	1" - 2.5"	1.5" - 4"
St. Augustine	2.5" - 4"	4" - 6"
Zoysia	1" - 2.5"	1.5" - 4"
Buffalo	2" to unmowed	3" if mowing

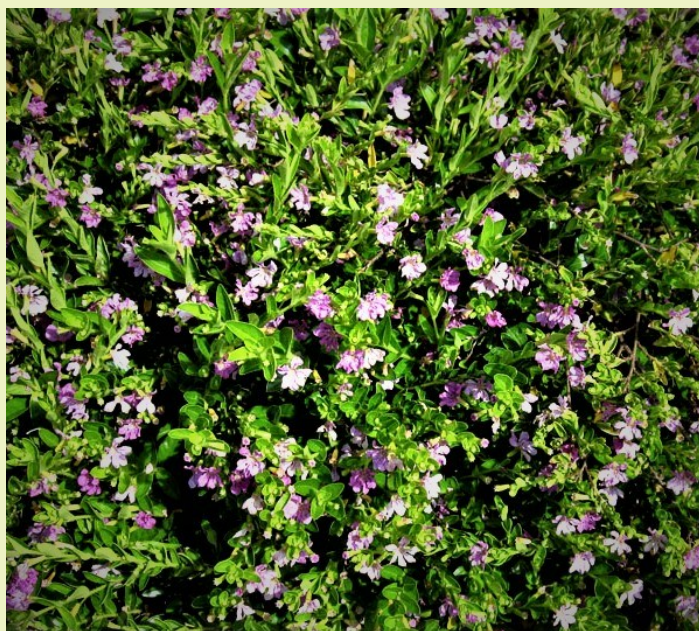
## Plant Spotlight

### Allyson Mexican Heather

*Cuphea hyssopifolia* 'Allyson'

Another new Texas Superstar plant has been announced! Mexican Heather is a nice pollinator-friendly annual that adds a good pop of color and bright green foliage to patio containers and flower beds.

- Size: 12"-18" tall, 16"-18" wide
- Needs sun, but does well with late afternoon shade



## Rainwater Harvesting

Did you know that August is one of our rainy months? Along with May, June, September and October, August averages higher rainfall. Consider installing a rain barrel or rainwater harvesting tank, so you can be ready to “save *from* a rainy day.”

Rainwater harvesting simply means collecting rainfall off an impervious surface (usually the roof but could be pavement or other surface) and diverting to a storage tank for later use. Harvested rainwater is often used for landscaping but can be treated and pressurized to use inside the home. It's possible to collect quite a bit of water from rainfall, more than you might think. One inch of rain provides 0.6 gallons of water per square foot of catchment area. So a 2,000 square foot roof could collect 1,200 gallons of water for every inch of rain – that's about 24,000 gallons of water in an average rainfall year. And even more than that in a higher than average rainfall year!

Catching rainfall can be simple or extensive – some homeowners are incorporating large systems with tanks that hold thousands of gallons, and others are starting with a small rain barrel. Whether large or small, rainwater harvesting systems can really help conserve water and keep plants alive during drought. For more info, including a helpful calculator to determine tank size, gutter size etc. visit [rainwaterharvesting.tamu.edu](http://rainwaterharvesting.tamu.edu).

There are also rainwater harvesting demonstrations created by the Concho Valley Master Gardeners that are open to the public located at the Tom Green 4-H Center, 3168 N. US Highway 67. Stop by to see the tanks and how they are set up and get ideas for a home system.



## West-Texas Tough Trees

Trees are the most permanent part of a landscape and require the longest time investment. They are very valuable and if you are going to plant a new tree, be sure to choose one that will thrive in this climate.

There is a saying that goes – ‘the best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago, but the next best time is now.’ Well, summer is actually a hard time of year to plant trees, but take note of the ones you like that are performing well and wait until October or November to plant some for yourself.

Good large trees include bur oak, chinquapin oak, Chinese pistache and cedar elm. Small trees can also play an important role in the landscape, so don't forget about ornamental flowering trees. They can also help cool homes by casting shade on outside walls.

A good flowering ornamental tree is the desert willow, and the ones in town have been doing really well and are blooming nice this year. Flowers can be pink, purple or white and there are even some seedless varieties available such as Art's Seedless and Timeless Beauty.

The Texas persimmon is a fun small tree to plant, though it can be hard to find. It has interesting bark, is evergreen and grows in a very interesting wild, twisted form.

The Texas Mountain Laurel is also a good choice; it's evergreen, pretty easy to find, and is very tough. These are just a few ideas, there are many native and well-adapted species out there to try—just do some research and make sure the one you want is able to handle the west Texas climate and soil.

When choosing a spot to plant, some careful planning can help maximize the shade that both large and small trees provide. Place them carefully so they deflect sun off the home and they can help reduce the utility bill in the summer. They can also be great landscape design assets and provide color and interest to the yard.

## Caterpillars in Trees

While we like to welcome butterfly caterpillars to our landscapes because we enjoy seeing them turn into beneficial adult butterflies, moth caterpillars are often a major nuisance. Pest moth caterpillars can build up into large numbers and do major damage on plants. Some common pest caterpillars to look out for this time of year include the tomato horn worm which can damage tomato plants, peppers, and others in the Solanaceae family as well as the walnut caterpillar which affects pecans and the fall webworm which can affect many types of trees; though it's named for fall it actually can get starting in the summer.

Fall Webworms are caterpillars that form webbing in tree branches to protect themselves from predators while they feed on the leaves. They generally don't threaten the life of a tree, or even cause too much stress.

But an easy way to get rid of webworms is to simply use a long stick to tear open the webbing to let birds take care of them. If a tree gets infested with many webworm colonies it's a good idea to break them open so they can be eaten by predators and stop damaging the tree.

Walnut caterpillars on the other hand, can do some damage to pecan trees and can cause stress if they get out of hand. They can defoliate large sections of the tree, so treatment is occasionally needed.

Walnut caterpillars will congregate on the trunk at certain stages of their life cycle and this is the easiest time to treat them. If you see masses of walnut caterpillars try a contact insecticide while they're easily accessible. Otherwise, a product like Bt or Spinosad can be sprayed on the canopy where they are feeding.



Just be sure to not get Bt or any other pest treatment on butterfly plants because it can damage the caterpillars we want to stick around.

## Collecting Seeds

For those of you that have a vegetable garden, it might be helpful to remember to save some of the seeds from your harvest to plant another crop next year. And when we get closer to fall, it will be a good time to save seeds from flowers and other landscape plants to share with friends and neighbors.

Not all plants make viable seeds, but many do - ranging from trees like Texas mountain laurel to garden vegetables like tomatoes and peppers. Just remember that if the garden plant is a hybrid or readily cross-pollinates, the seed will not grow a new plant exactly like the plant it came from. But if you planted true-to-type varieties or self pollinating crops, the seeds will come up the same.

Many cucurbits, for example, easily cross pollinate - so if there are different types of melons or squashes growing in the same vicinity their seeds will likely grow into new plants that are different than the fruit they came from.

To harvest vegetable seeds, select from fully mature fruit. Some crops like summer squash and okra are best harvested before they are full-sized for culinary use, so at the end of the season leave some fruit on the plant to fully mature in order to collect viable seed.

A good indicator that flower seeds are ready would be when the stem they are on is brown and dried at least halfway down. The seed head should be brown and dry as well. Don't pick seeds that are still moist, soft or fleshy if you plan on storing them.

If your plant is prone to having the seed head explode and release the seeds before you get a chance to collect them, try tying a paper bag or a knee high stocking over the maturing seed pod. Moonflowers and bluebonnets tend to pop open, scattering the seed when mature.

After the seeds are collected, allow them to dry completely. Then place in a sealed container and keep in a cool, dry spot until the next season. Silica gel packs, like those that come in vitamin bottles, leather goods and electronics, can be added to help keep the seeds dry. If there is moisture left during storage, mildew will develop and ruin the viability of the seeds.

# Upcoming Events

July 2020



As we begin to slowly resume in-person educational programs, we will make safety a priority—social distancing will be followed. For July, programs will be limited to 10 people in attendance. For the most up-to-date info, follow the Facebook Page “[Tom Green County Horticulture](#).”

Thursday, July 9, 2:00pm-4:00pm

## **Gardening Seminar—Fall Vegetable Gardening**

**Location:** People/Plant Connection Headquarters, 416 South Oaks St

Cost: \$25

Speaker: Allison Watkins

Hosted by the People/Plant Connection; Fall is a great time of year to get a warm season crop from vegetables like tomatoes, squash and cucumbers. Late fall is also the time to plant cool season crops like carrots, beets and broccoli. Find out what to plant and when!

Reservation required: Call Susan Stanfield 325-656-3104

Friday, July 17, 12:00pm

## **Lunch N Learn Class - Xeriscape, Not Zeroscape**

**Location:** People/Plant Connection Headquarters  
416 South Oaks St

Cost: \$5

Speaker: Allison Watkins

Hosted by the People/Plant Connection; Learn how a desert-style landscape can be beautiful and interesting!

Reservation required: Call Susan Stanfield 325-656-3104



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



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