

# Concho Valley Horticulture Update

December 2020

## Pruning Landscape Trees

Pruning of landscape shade trees can technically be done any time of year, though the winter season is the best time for major pruning. It is good to do it when the trees are dormant because they need their leaves during the growing season to make food for the whole plant, and major pruning reduces the food factories. And timing is particularly important for oak trees; they should not be pruned from February 1 to July 1 because this is the window of time that oak wilt is most easily spread through an insect vector – the nitidulid beetle. Oak wilt is a fungal disease that can affect any kind of oak, but is particularly damaging to red oaks and live oaks. Other methods for prevention include sterilizing tools before pruning and painting all pruning cuts with spray paint. Be sure to never bring in any unseasoned red oak firewood to your property; wood that has been left to dry for a year or more does not pose a threat.

Don't think of pruning as a quick fix for tree structure problems, it will usually not be able to immediately correct all issues – especially if the tree is mature and has not been pruned before. Pruning is a gradual process that should be carefully planned and carried out over the life of a tree to promote good structure. Whether you do the pruning yourself, or hire a tree service to do the work, it's important to be involved and guide the process. Here are a few basic tips for good pruning techniques.

First, remove dead, damaged or broken limbs. Then step back and take a look at the overall canopy, and pay special attention to 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 diameter greater than six inches.

Avoid 'lion tailing' trees, which is easy to do to large, tall shade trees. The inner, lower branches are easier to reach but thinning the inside of the canopy can leave tufts of leaves and smaller branches at the tips. This can damage the health and structure of the tree because the tips catch the wind like a sail – the bending and swaying impairs structural integrity.

## December To-Do's

- Plant bulbs
- Turn off irrigation - but still water occasionally, depending on plant type and weather
- Replenish mulch in beds
- Plant cool season vegetables such as lettuce, spinach and kale

## Pecan Update



The Concho Valley Pecan Show is being Judged on Friday, December 4th.

Keep an eye out on our website for results:

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

## Christmas Trees and Decor

Using real plants can be a lot of fun for Holiday decorations, whether it's a living Christmas tree that can be planted after the season or greenery cut from the yard. For those that are not allergic, real plants add fragrance and beauty and are hard to beat.

Evergreen shrubs in the landscape such as juniper and holly can be used to create homemade wreaths, or boughs to place on mantles and table centerpieces. It won't hurt the plant to prune it this time of year, just don't overdo it; don't remove more than about 25% when getting cuttings. Rosemary is a great evergreen herb that can be utilized during the holiday season as well. Cuttings smell nice and can be used along with the other evergreen cuttings, or a small potted rosemary plant can be pruned into the shape of a Christmas tree and decorated with small ornaments.

If using a real Christmas tree select a fresh, healthy one. Try a local Christmas tree farm to cut your own down and know it's as fresh as possible. If purchasing pre-cut, give the needles a gentle tug; they should stay put and not come off easily. To keep it fresh, cut an inch off the bottom after transporting to the final location where it will be displayed and place in water immediately. Keep the basin full of water so the tree can readily absorb what it needs. This helps not only with appearance, but with safety – trees that dry out are more prone to fires.

If you'd like a tree to plant after the holiday, living Christmas trees are a fun option. Species selection is important, as we are limited as to what kinds of evergreen trees will thrive or can survive in the Concho Valley. The Arizona cypress and Afghan pine are two examples that should do well. Live trees can only be used inside for a limited amount of time because of the warm, dry air and the lack of light; so they can't be used as long as cut trees. Wait until less than 10 days to Christmas before bringing in a live tree and then plant it immediately afterward.

Winter is a good time of year for tree planting - some tips for success include: dig a hole that's wider than the root ball but no deeper, plant in an area with full sun and plenty of room to grow to mature size, and apply a layer of wood-based mulch over the root ball after planting. Water the tree well after planting, and then water as needed until established.



## Plant Spotlight

### Lacebark Elm

*Ulmus parvifolia*

Lacebark elm is a medium-sized landscape tree, about 40 feet tall, with a broad, vase-shaped crown. The name comes from its interesting exfoliating bark - it sloughs off in random patches that reveal brown, gray, orange, or green bark underneath





## Winter To-Do List

One of the things I love about living in Texas is the mild winter. Of course, not every winter day is mild and there are some icy cold days too, but there are plenty of beautiful cool sunny days that are perfect for working in the yard. Many plants are dormant so it may seem like there's not as much to do this time of year, but there are plenty of landscape and garden tasks to get done right now. First, plant spring bulbs if you'd like to have a pop of color in the late winter. Choose bulbs that are adapted to the southern climate, such as daffodils, and/or make sure that cold-climate bulbs like tulips are pre-chilled or they won't flower well. If the soil is hard and compacted incorporate plenty of compost before planting.

Spruce up the curb appeal of the home with some cool season color such as snapdragons, stock, ornamental kale and cabbage, and pansies. Keep the vegetable garden productive by planting winter crops like broccoli, kale and swiss chard. Clean up frozen perennial tops like yellow bells, and mulch over the roots so they come back strong in the spring. Replenish mulch in all the beds to conserve water, keep weeds out, and help plants grow better.

Winter is also a season for tree pruning, but don't prune early spring flowering trees and shrubs such as Indian hawthorn, redbuds and Texas Mountain laurels. Wait until after they flower; they bloom on old growth and pruning before they flower will remove many of the blossoms.



## Plan Ahead to Plant Fruit Trees

Many landscape and garden plantings are spur of the moment decisions, but most landscape additions have the best success with some planning ahead. Careful selection of planting location and variety, and good bed preparation can make a big difference for plants to be more productive and live longer.

This is especially true for fruit trees – it is very important to choose the right crop and variety and use good planting techniques. Container-grown fruit trees can be planted any time of year (though summer is the most difficult time of year to establish, and fall/winter is best) and bare-root trees should only be planted during the dormant winter season – about mid-December through February. Right now is a great time to consider adding a fruit tree or two to the home landscape, to provide a fresh, delicious harvest for years to come.

First, choose what kind of fruit to grow. Visit [tomgreen.agrilife.org/horticulture](http://tomgreen.agrilife.org/horticulture) to see a list of recommended fruit and nut varieties for the Concho Valley. Apples, pears, peaches, plums, apricots, pomegranates and figs are all good fruit tree choices. Select a variety that is adapted to the local climate. Orders can be placed with nurseries ahead of time to ensure the desired plants are available when it's time to plant.

Fruit trees require full sun and well-drained soil. Choose a sunny location in the yard and check the drainage by digging a 1ft deep hole and fill with water. If the water drains within 24 hours, the drainage is acceptable. Over 24 hours is less desirable, and over 48 hours is considered unsuitable for fruit trees. If drainage is poor, a large 10ft square raised bed can be installed for the fruit tree, or the soil can be pushed into a raised berm to increase drainage.

Till the area to be planted and incorporate compost. Soil amendments are not recommended when planting large shade trees because the root system will become too large – but fruit trees are smaller and benefit from enriching the soil to increase organic matter and drainage. Some annual ryegrass can be planted and grown on the plot as a 'green manure' or cover crop until tree planting time, to create small channels in the soil and keep the soil aerated and loose. Till in before planting the tree, and finish with wood mulch. Research shows that newly planted fruit and nut trees grow bigger, faster when a thick layer of mulch is applied over a wide area around the trunk.

## Control Overwintering Insects

Now through late winter is an appropriate time of year to apply an insect control product called dormant oil. Dormant oil is a type of horticultural oil that is a thicker, heavier formulation and should only be applied when plants are dormant. Horticultural oils are liquid products that can be either plant based (such as neem, soybean, etc) or petroleum based and are applied as sprays to control many plant pests. Horticulture oils are good because they are safe to use, are very effective, and have a limited effect on beneficial insects.

Redbud trees are particularly prone to scale infestation and will greatly benefit from a dormant oil application this time of year. Oils can control insects by blocking up the airways that the insects breathe through (called spiracles), so they suffocate. Horticultural oils require thorough coverage, and direct contact with the pest so apply properly for full benefit.

Dormant oils are named as such because they are only to be applied in the dormant season. This is because if applied in the warm season, it can scorch, or essentially 'cook' the plant due to it being a heavier oil. Dormant oils are especially useful in controlling scale and mite insects, which are otherwise difficult to control. They also help control any other insects that are overwintering on the plant, waiting to re-emerge in the spring.

Scale insects are small pests that are found on trunks, stems, and sometimes foliage of plants. There are different types of scale, one type called armored scale will secrete a waxy substance that covers and protects them while they feed on the plant. They look like little scabs, or spots on the plant and come in colors ranging from red, orange, black, and yellow. They are hard to control because pesticides don't penetrate their protective covering. The adults never move, once they latch on they're there for good. Horticultural oils can control them very effectively if applied correctly, according to label directions.

Even though it's early winter and dormant oil is less likely to scorch plants, it is best applied on cooler, cloudy days, but not when below freezing.

## Soil Management



High quality soil is vital to growing healthy, attractive and productive landscape and garden

plants – but soil preparation is probably the most often skipped step when planting a new bed or vegetable plot. It's easy to overlook the steps of tilling the plot and adding compost into the soil when there are exciting flowers and vegetable plants to get into the ground. But for those flowers and vegetables to reach their potential, they need a good root system and that requires rich soil with organic matter (unless the plan is to plant a desert plant or something that prefers 'lean' soil with little organic matter; in that case, skip the soil preparation and plant away).

Whether for planting now - winter annuals, fruit trees, etc., or planning ahead for spring planting, it's a great time of year to work on improving soil. There are many beautiful, nice weather days to take advantage of to work outside and amend soil to give plants the best environment possible when they do get planted.

A good way to start is to do a soil test through the soils lab at Texas A&M University. Visit the website [soiltesting.tamu.edu](https://soiltesting.tamu.edu) for instructions. Simply dig some soil in several spots in the area of interest, mix together in a bucket for a composite sample, and remove any rocks or leaves. Mail the sample with the form to the lab to find out the soil pH, nutrient levels, and more.

Then, organic matter needs to be incorporated into the soil. Improving soil does require some physical labor, but it's not complicated. Simply till or dig up the bed and add a three-inch-deep layer 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.

# Upcoming Events

December 2020

Check out an extensive list of free educational videos provided by Texas A&M here:

<https://www.youtube.com/c/AggieHorticulture/videos>

*Please be sure to call ahead to attend programs; due to increasing COVID-19 cases schedules may change with short notice.*

Thursday, December 10, 2:00pm-4:00pm

## **West Texas Gardening 101—Drying Flowers**

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

Cost: \$20

Hosted by the People/Plant Connection; Learn how to dry and preserve flowers and then use to create a beautiful shadow box. To reserve a spot visit [Click Here](#) or call Susan Stanfield 325-656-3104

Friday, December 18, 12:00pm

## **Lunch N Learn Class - Fruit Trees for the Concho Valley**

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

Cost: \$5

Speaker: Allison Watkins

Hosted by the PPC; Learn what to plant and how to care for it to get a delicious fruit harvest from your own yard! To reserve a spot visit [Click Here](#) or call Susan Stanfield 325-656-3104

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



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