

Concho Valley Horticulture Update

May 2021

Growing Pumpkins

May is a great time to plant okra, cantaloupe, pumpkin, squash, sweet potato and black-eyed pea. Pumpkins are a great crop to grow, especially for families – kids particularly enjoy them. The seeds are large and easy to plant, they grow quickly once they sprout, and the large leaves and flowers are fun to track and measure. Gardening is a healthy, educational and fun activity and growing pumpkins with kids or grandkids is a great way to connect with them.

There are many different types to try; 'Festival' squash is a nice small variety that can be grown in containers on a patio, and is colorful. There are white ones like 'Blanco' or 'Shiver.' 'Grizzly Bear' is a fun warty variety. If you'd like to carve jack-o-lanterns for fall, some good varieties include 'Charisma,' 'Mellow Yellow' and 'Igor.' If pumpkin pie and other desserts is the goal, plant pie pumpkin varieties like 'Small Sugar,' 'Orange Smoothie' and 'Dickinson' (which is actually more a type of butternut squash than pumpkin).

Of course it's fun to try and grow as large a pumpkin as you can, and if a giant pumpkin is the goal choose a variety like 'Dill's Atlantic Giant' or 'Big Max.' The People/Plant Connection, a local nonprofit organization that promotes horticulture therapy, is offering free giant pumpkin seeds for anyone in the Concho Valley that would like to try their hand at growing a large pumpkin. There will also be a weigh-in at the end of the season with ribbons for the heaviest entries. To request seeds, visit <https://www.peopleplantconnection.org/> or call 325-656-3104.

Plant in soil that has been well prepared with compost, and be sure to allow plenty of room for the plant to spread out - a plot about 10'x10' in size. Keep the soil consistently damp for the seeds to germinate (about a week). After the plant has a good root system, water deeply as needed and apply mulch around the plant. Don't let the plants dry out – the large leaves lose a lot of water to transpiration, and the fruit needs plenty of water to grow to full size.

Leaf cover is good and will help prevent sunscald as the pumpkins grow. Pumpkins are ripe when the skin is hard and the stem has turned brown and dried up. There are a few pests to watch out for, so monitor for insects such as squash bug and squash vine borer, as well as diseases like downy mildew.

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 black-eyed 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

Protect Beneficial Insects

The recent cold front put a brief pause on spring activity in the garden and landscape, but a quick return to warm weather has everything buzzing and growing again. Gardening is focused on the plants, but there are so many other living things involved – microbes in the soil providing nutrients to plants, beneficial insects pollinating flowers and keeping pest populations down, earthworms aerating soil, and more. It is a very fine balance, and it is important to remember to let nature help as much as possible! While some insects feed on plants and cause damage, many more are harmless or even beneficial. Predators, parasitoids, and pollinators are all necessary for a successful landscape or garden.

Predators are insects that hunt and kill other insects. Some are broad feeders and eat many different insects, and some are more specialized such as ladybugs and green lacewings that prefer to feed on aphids. Since aphids are plant pests, ladybugs and lacewings are very desirable in the yard. Parasitoids are insects that live in or on another insect and eventually kill them. One example is the braconid wasp that lays eggs on tomato hornworms. When they hatch, the larvae kill the hornworm. Tomato hornworms feed on and damage tomato plants, so anything helps keep them under control is a friend to vegetable gardeners.

And many fruit and vegetable crops need pollinators to produce fruit – squash, melons, apples, cucumbers, etc require insect pollination, most of which is done by

bees. Butterflies, moths, flies, beetles, and more also contribute. To keep predators, parasitoids and pollinators hard at work in your yard be mindful of them, try to encourage their populations, and be careful to not kill them. Pesticides can be useful when used correctly,

but always follow the label and limit the use of broad-spectrum insecticides. Beneficial insects tend to be more sensitive to them. Overusing pesticides often makes pest problems worse, increasing the quantity and variety of detrimental insects in the yard. This happens when beneficial insect populations are reduced. For info on controlling pests in the yard or garden without damaging beneficials, visit the website <https://landscapeipm.tamu.edu>.

To help pollinators, plant bee- and butterfly-friendly flowers to provide food and nectar. Some pollinators utilize a wide variety of plants while others require specific host plants. For example, planting milkweed in the yard is a big help for monarchs as they migrate north this spring. Swallowtail caterpillars like plants in the carrot family, like dill, fennel and parsley.



Plant Spotlight

Texas Gold Columbine

Aquilegia chrysantha hinckleyana
‘Texas Gold’

This Texas Superstar plant is a wonderful perennial for shady areas. Blooms best under deciduous shade trees or anywhere with dappled shade. Columbines tend to not do well in the heat but Texas Gold is the best bet for west Texas temperatures. Grows about two feet tall and wide, striking blooms in the spring.



Managing Khakiweed and Take-All Root Rot

It is the time of year to discuss two of the most common landscape questions that local homeowners ask about – how to control khakiweed and how to manage take-all root rot in St. Augustine lawns.

Khakiweed (*Alternanthera pungens*) is not up yet, it is too early in the season; but it is one of the most annoying weeds in west Texas yards. Homeowners that have struggled with it in the past should get a head start and make plans for prevention and control now. Khakiweed grows flat, spread out on the ground with oval-shaped leaves and produces painful, annoying burs. It is very opportunistic and grows well in bare spots and thinned out turf, so the first and most effective means of control is to ensure something is occupying the soil. Deep mulch, dense groundcovers and healthy thick turf are the most important things that can keep khakiweed from taking over the landscape.

Khakiweed is a perennial, meaning it comes back from roots so pre-emergent will not totally control it – but pre-emergent can be helpful if applied in the late winter to prevent more plants from coming up by seed. Post-emergent herbicides that contain a combination of 2,4-D with mecoprop, carfentrazone, dicamba, or metsulfuron (for example, Fertilome brand Weed Free Zone) are effective for controlling existing plants. Apply early when the plants start to emerge, while they are still small; large mature plants will not be easily controlled with herbicide and should be physically removed.

Take-all root rot is a fungal disease that affects mainly St. Augustine grass, and causes roots to decay. Symptoms usually show up in the early summer – starting with yellowing that eventually turns brown, leaving large dead patches. The pathogen thrives in alkaline soil, with frequent irrigation and excessive nitrogen. So to manage it in the home landscape, first start with good cultural management of the grass. Water deeply and as infrequently as possible, instead of watering several times per week. Apply nitrogen fertilizer based on a soil test only and not just on a set schedule. Beyond cultural control, additional treatments should be based on the time of year the pathogen is active. Some experts say the disease is active in the spring, while others say fall. If take-all is a significant problem, try treating in both spring and fall. Recommended treatment includes top-dressing with sphagnum peat moss and applying a fungicide such as azoxystrobin, as well as a micro-nutrient fertilizer that contains manganese.

For more detailed info on these common landscape nuisances, visit <https://tomgreen.agrilife.org/horticulture/> to see a publication on each.

Tree Prognosis

The most common questions from homeowners lately have been about the prognosis of their landscape trees. Pecans, red oaks, fruit trees and other deciduous trees that were still completely dormant when the winter storm hit fared very well in the cold temperatures; but evergreens, and ash trees that tend to start budding out early in the season, were more prone to damage.

Many live oaks have been leafing out and appear to be recovering, but some are not. Crape myrtles and pomegranates were dormant but did suffer cold damage as well. Ash trees seem to be the most widely affected landscape tree in the area, and many have significant dieback or are not coming back at all.

Patience is still needed. There will likely be many ash trees that need significant pruning or to be removed, and even some like oaks; and many crape myrtles and pomegranates will need to be cut to the ground, but give them all a few more weeks to have the full picture.

Trees that have not leafed out by May 1 will most likely not come back and will need to be removed. But they will not post a risk right away, and it's fine to wait until the summer (July 1) to know for sure. But start coming up with a plan for removal of large trees that do not leaf back out, as it will be a big project and needs to be carefully planned and budgeted. Dead trees that are left in landscapes too long do become a hazard and pose the risk of falling and damaging property or hurting people.

Summer Landscape Color

Every year the weather is so different and changeable, it makes it hard to go by 'average' temperatures and rainfall when planning the landscape. But one thing is certain, west Texas yards need plants that are heat tolerant, drought tolerant and tough. Now is a good time of year to establish some new perennials in the landscape and also get some annual color going for the porch and patio; when selecting plants, choose the ones that will be able to last and be beautiful even when it gets hot and dry.

When choosing tough plants, don't think that they are limited to only desert plants like cactus and yucca. While those can certainly be used in a well designed and beautiful yard, they are not the only option – there are many tough plants of all shapes, sizes, styles and colors. One good resource to use to help discover what plants would be well adapted and easy to grow would be the Texas Superstar website, <http://texassuperstar.com>. Texas Superstar plants have been tested by Texas A&M University throughout the state and have been proven to do well and are widely available at nurseries. Some beautiful perennials and shrubs to consider would include Lynn's Legacy cenizo, Belinda's Dream rose, turk's cap, Henry Duelberg sage, Mexican bush sage and Moy Grande hibiscus. Annuals that will be sure to bring color pop to the home include pentas, Tidal Wave petunia, Whopper begonias, and periwinkle.

To get the most impact from annuals, plant them close together in 'pockets' or small masses instead of spreading them sparsely through a large bed. Utilize annuals as accents that help draw the eye to a focal point, or to direct attention to the front door of the home and create an inviting atmosphere. Prepare soil with compost to improve drainage and provide nutrients. Use mulch after planting to help retain moisture and keep out weeds.

When purchasing more permanent plants like perennials, remember that the zone number on the tag is simply an indication of cold hardiness – how cold of a winter will they survive and come back the next spring. It does not tell heat tolerance, soil pH needs or anything else. So, while the hardiness zone number is an important factor, there are many other aspects that affect how well a plant will do in the Concho Valley. See what plants do well in local landscapes, parks and demo gardens, and use all the resources available to make good plant selection choices in order to have a thriving, beautiful home landscape.

Garden Weed Control

Herbicides are often thought of as the principal option for controlling weeds, but while there are some 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. Labels must always be read and followed very carefully, especially for food production. And the old-fashioned methods like hoeing are still very useful and important for vegetable crops. 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 control 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.



Upcoming Events

May 2021

Please note - masks and social distancing are required at all programs

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

West Texas Gardening 101—Vegetables

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

Cost: \$20

Speaker: Allison Watkins

Hosted by the People/Plant Connection; Learn about best practices for success in growing your own food!

To reserve a spot visit [Click Here](#) or call Susan Stanfield 325-656-3104

Friday, May 21, 12:00pm

Lunch N Learn Class - Composting 101

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

Cost: \$5

Speaker: Allison Watkins

Hosted by the PPC; Learn how to make your own compost, and find out how to use it for the best benefit to the garden. To reserve a spot visit [Click Here](#) or call Susan Stanfield 325-656-3104



Tuesday, May 4th is San Angelo Gives!

Visit <https://www.sanangelogives.org/>

to donate to local non-profit organizations

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



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