

# Concho Valley Horticulture Update

June 2021

## Landscape Irrigation

Water conservation is always important, but it is especially timely to talk about as we head into summer. Spring rains were fewer than what we would have liked, and we are heading into summer a little behind on rainfall but not in terrible shape. This year it will be important to keep a close eye on trees and shrubs that may look healthy now, but mild to moderate vascular system damage from the winter storm is a possibility that we will not be able to see until summer heat arrives. Don't overwater anything but just watch out for wilting and water stress through the summer.

Saving water is important for our community, to be able to have enough water in our municipal resources; but focusing on water efficiency in the landscape also just helps increase success with plants. Landscapes and gardens that have been designed to save water are more likely able to thrive and look beautiful through the harsh summer season. There are many ways to reduce water use in the home landscape, and the Earth-Kind Landscaping principles are a good place to begin: planning and design, practical turf areas, appropriate plant selection, soil improvement, efficient irrigation, effective use of mulch, appropriate maintenance, and rainwater harvesting.

All will make a difference, but plant selection is a great place to start. Choose plants that can handle heat and drought conditions and that will look beautiful all summer long. Some of my favorites include mystic spires salvia, Pride of Barbados, Earth-Kind roses (see earth-kind.tamu.edu), blackfoot daisy, wooly stemodia, gomphrena, and sweet potato vine.

Even established drought tolerant plants will need irrigation periodically, so be efficient in how the water is delivered. Drip irrigation should be used in all cases except turf (and even turf can be watered with subsurface drip systems). Drip irrigation is better for plant health because it reduces disease pressure, and it saves water because there is little to no evaporation. Spray irrigation for turfgrass should be as efficient as possible, and there are nozzles available that are designed to reduce water waste.

For more detailed info on how to have a beautiful, thriving landscape through the summer heat of west Texas, join us for a free educational program on Saturday, June 12th. For details and to RSVP visit <https://tomgreen.agrilife.org/> or call 325-659-6522.

## June To-Do's

- Continue to dead-head flowers
- Replenish mulch as needed
- Keep beds weeded to eliminate competition for nutrients, sun and water
- Watch for chinch bug & grub damage in lawns

## Pecan Update



Pecan Nut Casebearer emergence is very spotty this year due to the winter storm in February and the cool spring temperatures, and we have no spray dates to recommend. PNC pressure will be light this year and no spraying will be needed for trees with a good crop set.

## Plant Selection

West Texas is a challenging environment to grow landscapes and gardens. It's important to start with the best possible plants that are well-matched to each particular planting site – full sun vs. shade, well-drained soil vs. heavy clay soil, and irrigation water quality/quantity should all be top considerations. We have long been focused on finding and promoting heat-tolerant plants that can handle west Texas summers, but this year we remembered how cold it can get as well. We need tough plants, and there are many great choices and options – it just takes a little extra effort to research and select the best plants to have success.

Many homeowners lost trees, shrubs and perennials in the winter storm and are wondering if they should replant the same thing or pick something more cold-hardy. There is no single right answer, every landscape is different and there's nothing wrong with replanting pittosporums and Indian hawthorns if that's what's wanted. But one recommendation I do have is - consider not replanting Arizona ash trees. They have long been considered undesirable species for west Texas since they are short-lived and tend to have various issues. Trees are a big investment of time, money and effort and should hopefully be around for a long time. Choose trees that can best handle the extremes of west Texas like bur oak, chinquapin oak, and cedar elm.

When choosing plants, it's usually not enough to just look at the plant stake at the nursery – try to research and choose specific plants and go looking for those plants. A plant may be labeled as needing full-sun, but most full-sun plants can appreciate a little afternoon shade in west Texas when it's so hot in the summer. Zone numbers on plant labels refer simply to cold hardiness, and don't tell a full story of whether the plant can handle the heat, alkaline soil, and other specific conditions.

Check out local city parks and gardens, be observant when driving through the neighborhood, and ask friends about what plants do well for them. Check out the Earth-Kind Plant Selector at <http://ekps.tamu.edu/> to get some ideas of what to plant. Also, try plants that are labeled as Texas Superstars by Texas A&M – they have been tested throughout the state and are readily available at most nurseries and garden centers. The newest Texas Superstar plants designated this year include Celebrity Tomato, Rock Rose, Black Stocking Napier Grass and BBQ Skewers Rosemary ('Glorizia' variety). Visit <https://texassuperstar.com/> to see the full list of plants.

## Plant Spotlight

### Black Stockings Napier Grass

*Pennisetum* x 'Black Stockings'

This quick-growing ornamental grass is most likely an annual in the Concho Valley, but may survive winter if grown in a protected area. The deep purple color is very striking, and its heat and drought tolerance make it a good choice for landscapes as an accent or specimen plant. One of the newly designated Texas Superstar plants for 2021.





## Tomato Tips

Tomatoes are the most popular home-grown vegetable – they are delicious, healthy and very useful for meals. But they are not a particularly easy-to-grow crop; tomatoes can be tricky to produce in west Texas. Here are some tips to consider that may help improve success with home tomato crops.

Tomatoes are not hot weather plants, at least not ‘west Texas summer’ level of heat. While they are not cool season plants either and cannot survive freezing temperatures, they don’t set fruit as well during the hottest summer temperatures. A couple of ways around this issue are 1) timing of planting and 2) heat tolerant variety selection. For spring tomato production, plant large transplants as early as possible in the spring. Wait until all danger of frost has passed or consider planting early but have a plan for frost protection ready to go if needed. Starting with a large transplant in the cooler spring weather will increase the harvest you can get before hot temperatures set in.

A fall crop can be very productive as well; start with new transplants in July and when they are fully grown in September, temperatures will start to cool down and allow for fruit to form. July is an awfully hard time of year to start new plants, so keep a close eye on water needs, use mulch, and provide a shade covering for the hottest afternoon hours for the first few days (a large cardboard box will do, just don’t leave it there all day). Heat tolerant varieties such as Tycoon, Celebrity and Sunmaster will be better at setting fruit through the summer, and cherry tomatoes are a particularly good choice for heat tolerance.

Tomatoes grow best in rich soil full of organic matter. Add two to three inches of high-quality compost and incorporate down into the top six inches of soil. Use a thick layer of organic mulch after planting to help keep weeds controlled, prevent water from evaporating, and to keep soil cool. Soil preparation is an often-skipped step, but can make a big difference in vegetable production. Install drip irrigation which allows the water to be applied directly to the soil – this will increase water efficiency and decrease plant disease that can be spread with spray irrigation.

If growing in containers, use potting mix instead of real soil. Incorporate compost, but no more than 1/3 by volume. Mulch and drip irrigation can also be very beneficial for potted plants as well!

Finally, keep an eye out for pests. Some of the common pests include early blight disease, spider mites, tomato hornworms, and viral disease. Check out the Tomato Problem Solver at <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/vegetable/problem-solvers/tomato-problem-solver/> or contact the Extension Office for help identifying and treating tomato problems.

## Tree Prognosis - Continued

The most common questions coming into the Extension Office are still regarding trees and their prognosis, so it’s time to revisit that topic. The Texas A&M Forest Service recently released a very comprehensive article regarding oak tree recovery, and the info is helpful for other struggling trees as well. In summary, the recommendation is to wait until July. If there are no leaves by July, the tree is dead. Fertilization is not recommended unless there is an obvious nutrient deficiency, and pesticide applications are not recommended unless there is an apparent insect or disease. If the canopy does put some leaves out but it still looks thin and weak, consider waiting until next year to re-evaluate. For more in-depth info, visit the article at <https://tfsweb.tamu.edu/content/article.aspx?id=31600>.

For those wanting to replace trees and shrubs, container-grown plants can be planted any time of year but summer is the most difficult season to establish new woody plants. Fall, around October to November, is the best time of year to plant trees and shrubs.

When considering replacing trees and shrubs, carefully choose species that are well adapted or native to the area and try to create a more diverse landscape. If there is only one type of shade tree used in the yard, something that is damaging or deadly to that species can take out all the trees. If there are various types of trees utilized in the landscape, the odds are much better that some will be fine. Try mixing it up with a few different trees – an oak, an elm, a pecan. For a list of recommended trees and shrubs for the Concho Valley, visit <https://tomgreen.agrilife.org/horticulture/> and click on ‘Recommended Landscape Plants.’ You can also check out the Texas Tree Selector at <https://texastreeplanting.tamu.edu/> for a tool that helps you choose the best tree.

## Top Landscape 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, 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.

## Establishing Turf

The lawn is often an integral part of a home landscape. For those that prefer not having to mow and water as much as lawns require, there are alternative options like utilizing more groundcover, mulch and hardscaping – simply do an internet search for 'no lawn yard' for design ideas. A landscape without turf is definitely a possibility and can be done in a very beautiful, functional way. In fact, a yard full of shrubs, groundcovers, perennials etc. is much more interesting and attractive than a yard with nothing but grass. But many homeowners enjoy the lawn and find it necessary to have at least some turf; and while it is a good idea to limit the area turfgrass covers to about a third of the landscape to conserve water and reduce the need for fertilizer, etc. lawns do provide certain benefits that some want in their yard.

So for those that want to rejuvenate a thinned out lawn or want to start over and plant new turfgrass, this year is a good opportunity to plant grass. Once established, lawns can be 'trained' to be more water efficient by starting with good soil preparation and by watering correctly. But it does take frequent irrigation to get a lawn started, so those that would like to create a thick, healthy lawn should plant it soon so that it can grow in well while we are blessed with so much rainfall.

This is an especially good time right now to start from seed. Seed is less expensive than sod, and warm season grass seed like bermuda grass will germinate best in warm temperatures so early summer is ideal. Sod can technically be planted any time of year, but is best planted in spring or late summer/fall. Whichever method is used, start with good soil preparation to ensure success and also to conserve water after the lawn is established. Deeper rooted plants are more drought tolerant and healthier in hot weather, and the first step to growing deep roots is to prepare the soil. Clear the area of all plant matter and debris, then apply compost over the ground and till it in. Spread the seed according to the label instructions, or place the sod in an alternating pattern (like how bricks are laid) and water lightly and frequently at first. As the seeds sprout or the sod roots in, reduce the irrigation frequency but water more deeply. For more information, visit <https://tomgreen.agrilife.org/horticulture/> and click on the 'Establishing Turfgrass' link.

# Upcoming Events

June 2021

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

## **West Texas Gardening 101—Rainwater Harvesting**

**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

Saturday, June 12, 9:00am-12:00pm

## **Summer Landscaping and Irrigation Seminar**

**Location:** Tom Green 4-H Center, 3168 N US Highway 67, San Angelo

**Cost:** Free

**Speakers:** Dotty Woodson, retired Extension Specialist and Allison Strube, Water Utilities Director

Learn how to have an attractive, successful landscape in the harsh summertime while still conserving water! Free to attend but please RSVP by visiting <https://tomgreen.agrilife.org/> or call 325-659-6522

Friday, June 18, 12:00pm

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

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

**Cost:** \$5

**Speaker:** Allison Watkins

Hosted by the PPC; Xeriscape doesn't mean rocks with no plants! Learn how to create a beautiful, well-designed xeric landscape that saves water. To reserve a spot visit [Click Here](#) or call Susan Stanfield at 325-656-3104

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



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