



Concho Valley

December 2021

HORTICULTURE UPDATE

Winter Curb Appeal

I love fall and winter in Texas, but it is sad to see the pretty warm-season annuals and perennials fade away when it gets cold. There are several ways to keep the landscape looking bright, colorful and attractive through the winter though, and now is a good time to transition over to cool season color and interest.

Cool season annuals provide a big impact and beautiful color punch to the winter landscape. To get the best effect from annuals, start by preparing the soil with compost if planting in the ground or use potting mix if planting in containers. Ensure that the containers have good drainage holes for excess water to flow out. While proper plant spacing is important for permanent plants, annuals are just there for the season and can be squeezed together to make the most of them. Planting in small 'pockets' or groupings, strategically placed in beds or containers will be more impactful than spreading a flat of them throughout the whole bed. Some of the best winter annual flowers include pansy, stock and snapdragon.

Winter vegetables can also be attractive in the landscape, providing a double benefit – food and beauty. Swiss chard and kale are some of the most striking, but all the winter vegetables provide bright, vibrant greenery like spinach, lettuce and broccoli. Keep annual flowers and vegetables watered and fertilized to have the best production and flowering. Keep flowers pinched as they fade to keep pansies, snapdragons etc blooming strong. Include some cool-season or evergreen herbs like parsley, rosemary and thyme to have fresh scents and greenery, and to have fresh herbs handy for cooking.

Shrubs that produce bright red berries in the winter like possumhaw holly, nandina and pyracantha make the yard look festive and appealing in the winter. Other ways to create a beautiful, inviting atmosphere in the yard in the winter include holiday décor like wreaths and lights.

Clean up the fallen leaves once they finish coming down, but don't bag them up and send off to the landfill. Often the leaves can simply be mowed and shredded into the lawn, or rake them up and add to the compost bin or use as mulch in beds. A fresh layer of mulch makes a big difference in curb appeal and is very helpful for keeping plant roots protected from cold weather. Keep weeds under control and continue to mow if needed for attractive yard all season long.

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

We will be conducting the annual Concho Valley Pecan show on Friday, December 3rd. Entries will be accepted until noon on Wednesday, December 1st. This is a great way to learn what variety of pecans you may have and to receive information on growing pecans in our area.

For details on how to enter, contact the extension office at 325-659-6528 or visit tomgreen.agrilife.org

Protecting Plants from Cold



The first hard freeze of the season is going to be later than average, but now that it's dipping into the 40's at night, it's time to start getting plants ready for winter. First, bring in tropicals and house plants that have been out for the warm season. Plants like tropical hibiscus and bougainvillea can usually be cut back and overwintered in a garage but a hobby greenhouse or brightly lit room inside the home would be better.

Depending on how cold and early the first freeze is, some gardeners choose to cover their warm season vegetables and perennials to extend production and flowering. This is usually worth it if the first cold spell is short lived, and it warms up for a while afterward. But when cold temperatures set in for the long term, it's usually best to give up on the tomatoes and mums and plant winter vegetables and flowers.

When covering plants, the key is to cover as much ground as possible to utilize heat rising from the soil at night. Don't cinch the covering around the stems, but drape it over like a tent all the way to the ground. Cardboard boxes or large plastic tubs work well.

Some commonly used evergreen plants are only marginally hardy here in the Concho Valley - like rosemary, cast iron plant, pittosporum and palm trees. If there is a particularly hard freeze (usually later in winter), it is helpful to cover them if possible. Better yet, plant them in more protected spots - microclimates like up against the home or protected from the north wind.

Overall, the two best things to do for plants to protect them from cold temperatures is to water before a hard freeze, and apply thick mulch. Wood mulch helps insulate the roots and can sometimes even mean the difference between coming back the next spring or not for tender perennials like Pride of Barbados and lantana. For heat-loving plants like Pride of Barbados, push the mulch back away from covering the roots in the spring so the sun can warm the soil and help it grow back sooner.

Plant Spotlight

'Autumn Star' Kale

Brassica oleracea

Kale is a very cold-hardy winter vegetable. 'Kalette' is a hybrid that produces mini bite-sized kale along the stem like brussels sprouts. Flavor is sweeter and more mild than standard kale. Great for eating fresh, or use any way you normally use kale.



Earth-Kind Landscaping

Now is a season when many are making goals and seeking out ways to improve their lives and their surroundings, and something to keep in mind is the Earth-Kind program recommended by Texas A&M. Whether you're one to make New Year's resolutions or not, it's always a good idea to make efforts to protect the environment – and making small choices and changes at the home level can make a big difference over time.

Not only is Earth-Kind better for the environment, but it can also increase success with home gardening and landscaping: attractive beds, productive vegetables. The Earth-Kind plan promotes research-proven techniques - it is a combination of both traditional and organic gardening practices. The main goals are to conserve water and energy, reduce fertilizer and pesticide use, and reduce landscape wastes ending up in landfills.

For example, when planning a fertilizer application for the yard, think about whether plants truly need any fertilizer or not, what kind to use, how much to put out, and when to apply it. The easiest way to answer some of these questions is to do a simple soil test through the Extension office. In the Earth-Kind plan, usually only the lawn and some vegetables should need fertilizer. With good plant selection and proper soil management, flower beds, shrubs and trees will generally not require fertilizer. When needed, only apply the recommended amount and be careful to not let any end up in the street.

Water conservation is also a big part of Earth-Kind landscaping. Utilize drip irrigation and mulch as much as possible and use sprinkler nozzles that are designed to lose less water to evaporation. As far as pesticides go, a good strategy to use is an integrated pest management system (IPM for short). While an Earth-Kind landscape doesn't completely rule out the use of all pesticides, they should be reduced and limited to the least toxic option.

There are several fundamental principles for Earth-Kind landscaping: good planning and design, soil management, practical turf areas, appropriate plant selection, efficient irrigation, use of mulch, appropriate maintenance, and rainwater harvesting. Each of these tools can help improve home gardening results, as well as improve the environment and protect natural resources

Butterflies and Birds

It has been enjoyable to see all the monarch butterflies that migrated through the Concho Valley on their way to Mexico for the winter. It's very inspiring and impressive to see insects that made it all the way down from the northern states and even Canada. Monarchs have been at risk of population decline for years and thanks to efforts to encourage the planting of milkweed, they have seen some recent gains. But it's still important to encourage monarch populations.

Milkweed is crucial for monarch butterflies because it's the only host plant for caterpillars. It's the only plant they will feed on. Planting milkweed in landscapes and pastureland is a simple way to help protect monarchs from declining further. The adult butterflies will feed on nectar from various flowers, so plant perennials that have long blooming periods like lantana, salvia and turk's cap.

There are many different species of milkweed, many of which are native to Texas but one nonnative variety *Asclepias curassavica* is very common in the nursery industry and is not the ideal choice for Texas landscapes. Also called tropical milkweed, this variety makes a satisfactory food source for the butterflies but the issue comes from the fact that it blooms year-round. According to Mike Merchant, retired Texas A&M Entomologist, tropical milkweed encourages monarchs to stay in one spot and form sedentary (non-migratory) populations. This can increase disease rates and mortality in monarch populations. So it's recommended to stick with native milkweed species, but tropical can be used if it's cut back in the fall, and kept cut back through the winter if it re-emerges.

Most gardeners' enjoyment of the outdoors goes beyond plants, many like to support pollinators like bees and butterflies and also like to attract desirable birds like hummingbirds and songbirds. Birds need food, water, shelter and places to nest – provide these and develop a habitat that will attract the enjoyable types. Shelter is provided through plants of various sizes, shapes and textures that birds can escape into away from predators. Diversity is good, a mixed planting of evergreen and deciduous trees and shrubs. Provide food with fruit and nut producing plants like possumhaw holly, Texas persimmon, redbud, and evergreen sumac. Put out a bird bath, and put up a bird feeder with seed – especially when no other food sources are available in the middle of winter, and see what new birds find their way into your yard.

Holiday Plants



Some of the most beautiful and traditional Christmas decorations are plants – Christmas trees, poinsettias, green garlands and more. Using real plants for decorating inside the home can add a lot of festive atmosphere and fragrance, for those who don't suffer from allergies. To have the best success with a real Christmas tree, purchase one that has vibrant green color and resilient needles that don't pull off when gently tugged – they should be flexible and moist. Or to have the freshest possible tree, cut one down yourself at a Christmas tree farm. Either way, when setting up the tree up at home, cut off the lower 2" of trunk to increase water uptake and place on a tree stand with a water basin. Refill the water basin regularly, even every day in some cases, to keep the tree fresh.

To use a living Christmas tree, a potted evergreen that can be planted outside after the holiday, purchase a species that is adapted to local conditions such as Arizona cypress or Afghan pine. Wait until close to the holiday before bringing inside to decorate – they should spend no more than about 10-14 days inside. Plant in the ground as soon as possible.

Poinsettias are essential for many during the holidays – select a plant that is thick and full, and has fully colored bracts that surround the flower. To keep it healthy, place in a location inside that is away from cold drafts and air vents that dry the plant out. Water when the soil begins to dry out; remove the decorative wrapper and place in the sink to soak thoroughly. Allow to drain completely before replacing the wrapper.

Christmas cactus is another fun holiday decoration that is a great house plant. Be careful not to overwater; allow the potting mix to completely dry out on top before watering and don't let the plant sit in water if using a drip tray underneath. Christmas cactus does like humidity though, so mist it regularly with distilled water.

Greenery is just as important as colorful flowers - cuttings of holly shrubs, junipers or rosemary in the landscape can be taken to make fresh wreaths and boughs for mantles, centerpieces etc. Just be careful to use good pruning techniques and don't cut the plants back excessively. And finally, though mistletoe is considered a pest to the trees it grows on, it's also a well-established tradition to have a sprig hanging in a doorway. Might as well use it if it's around – simply take a large cutting and tie on a decorative ribbon to hang it up with.

Winter To-Do's

It may seem like December is time to halt the yard work, but for those that want to stay productive and/or just enjoy the cooler weather there are plenty of things to do for the lawn and garden in the winter. Here are a few ideas of things to consider adding to the landscape to-do list during the colder months.

First, stay on top of pests. Dormant oil is an insect control option that can only be used in the dormant winter season. If applied correctly it can provide good control of insect pests that are overwintering on plants, and is a good choice for controlling scale insects. Redbud trees are particularly susceptible to scale and would likely benefit from a dormant oil application this winter. Keep cool season weeds managed in the lawn to keep the lawn healthy and help it come back strong in the spring.

Take advantage of cooler weather to get done some of the more labor-intensive chores that are more difficult in the summer heat, such as replenishing mulch in beds and improving soil by tilling in compost. A three- to four-inch deep layer of mulch does a lot of good for plants and is particularly important in the winter for tender perennials such as lantana, yellow bells and pride of Barbados.

The winter season is the only opportunity to plant bare-root trees, so if you'd like to add a fruit tree or pecan tree now is a good time to get some at an inexpensive price. Make a plan and plant carefully - bare root plants are tricky to get established well. Purchase freshly dug plants, soak the roots in a bucket before planting, and plant right away. Don't let them sit around for days, allowing the roots to dry up.



UPCOMING EVENTS

December 2021

Friday, December 3, 9am

Concho Valley Pecan Show

Location: Tom Green County Extension Office - 113 W. Beauregard, San Angelo

Cost: Free to enter and participate

Bring your pecans to be judged on quality and try for a ribbon! Deadline to enter is Wednesday, December 1st 12pm. For details on how to enter, visit <https://tomgreen.agrilife.org/>. Join us on December 3rd to help process and shell the pecans to prepare for judging.

Thursday, December 16, 2pm-4pm

West Texas Gardening 101 - Growing and Cooking with Herbs

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

Cost: \$20

Speakers: Allison Watkins, Courtney Redman

Hosted by the PPC; Join us to discuss growing herbs in the Concho Valley and how to use fresh herbs in recipes for healthy and flavorful dishes. To reserve a spot Click Here or call Susan Stanfield at 325-656-3104.

Friday, December 17, 12:00pm

Lunch N Learn Class - Trees for West Texas - Planting, Pruning and Care

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

Cost: \$5

Speaker: Allison Watkins

Hosted by the PPC; Let's talk trees! Find out the best species for the Concho Valley, best planting techniques, and other maintenance steps like proper pruning. To reserve a spot [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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