

HORTICULTURE UPDATE

Hobby Greenhouses

Every year during this season there are questions about hobby greenhouses as it gets colder. Many homeowners would like to have a place to overwinter valuable tropical plants and be able to extend the growing season. A small hobby greenhouse can be very useful and helpful but does require a lot of effort and time to keep it functional. And small greenhouses are more difficult to maintain a constant temperature and steady environment inside, so the largest that is feasible and would fit in the home landscape the better.

The main factors to consider with creating a hobby greenhouse are winter heating, summer cooling and a watering system. As hot as it gets in the south, greenhouses can lose their usefulness in the summer unless a good ventilation and cooling system is incorporated. But for many homeowners, winter is the only time they need one. A well designed and properly placed greenhouse can take advantage of sunlight to stay warmer inside. Use the clearest possible material to cover the greenhouse to allow as much light through as possible. A lean-to greenhouse placed on the south or west side of a building can take advantage of both sunlight and radiant warmth from the building to help keep plants from freezing.

A heater will be required for cold nights and to get through any particularly chilly winter spells. Only use heaters that are designed and labeled for greenhouses and that can be used around water. Be careful to not let the greenhouse get too hot during warm, sunny days that frequently come during winter because of our very changeable, erratic weather. Install vents that can be opened when it's hot and open up doors to allow air circulation. In the summer, utilize greenhouse shade cloth, vents, fans and evaporative cooling to limit the amount of light coming in and help keep plants cool if the greenhouse is to be used year-round.

Water should be easily accessible in the greenhouse; depending on the types of plants and the season, daily watering may be required. Even though the plants are inside a structure, the weather outside will impact how quickly they dry out. Water more frequently during sunny, windy, dry weather. Be careful not to overwater when it's cooler, humid and cloudy. For more specific recommendations on greenhouses and growing plants in them, visit <https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/ornamental/greenhouse-management/>.

December To-Do's

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

Pecan Update

This was a tough year for pecan production! Last year was highly prolific and this year is an 'off year' due to alternate bearing tendencies of pecans. Also the heat and drought stress reduced production. There were very few entries into the Concho Valley Pecan Show but those that were received will be sent to the West Region show in College Station.

House Plants



Research shows that plants can help with mental and physical health, not just outside in landscapes, gardens and parks but inside the home as well. Houseplants can help reduce stress and improve mental wellbeing.

Choose plants that are adapted to low light levels – selection and care are quite different for plants that stay inside the home than our typical landscape plants. Two major factors to focus on with house plants are light and water. Plants that are known to be good for inside a building are generally tropical plants native to areas with very dense canopies that can handle lower light levels; but all plants need some light to grow – and even house plants need more light than is usually available in the home to grow well and thrive.

A simple test to measure light levels and to help choose the best spot for houseplants can be done by holding a hand about 12 inches above the surface in question (floor, table, etc) during the brightest time of day. Look for the hand's shadow – if it is a clear and distinct dark shadow, that is a high light level. If it has a fuzzy outline and is a light, faint shadow that is low light. Place plants in the brightest light in order to have the most vigorous growth. Plants may survive in low light, but most won't have active growth or reach their potential.

Watering houseplants can be tricky; many plants do best when they can be watered thoroughly and the excess water is allowed to drain away well, but houseplants tend to be watered lightly and more frequently; and there is usually a tray underneath to catch the excess water which can create standing water for long periods of time. If possible, place houseplants in a sink or tub, water thoroughly and allow to drain well before returning. However, many houseplants can handle being watered where they stand, with the tray beneath, as long as they aren't overwatered – allow the potting soil to dry out a bit before watering again.

Some of the toughest house plants that work well in most homes include Christmas cactus, philodendron, ficus, pothos ivy, sansevieria, ZZ plant, dracaena, and aglaonema.

Plant Spotlight

Evergreen Sumac

Rhus virens

This shrub grows about 6-10 feet tall and makes a nice thick hedge or can be grown as a specimen single trunk small tree. Has fragrant but inconspicuous flowers in the summer and red berries in the fall (female plants only)



Winter Landscape Tasks

It's tough to figure out what to do in the winter landscape when the weather is so erratic - warm then cold with drastic changes in temperature from one day to the next.

Leaves are just starting to drop from pecans and should not be bagged up to take up space in the landfill, but used as valuable organic matter in the landscape. Most leaves can just be mowed over on the lawn to shred and break down into the soil, or they can be gathered up for a compost bin or used as mulch in the garden. Water needs are greatly reduced and irrigation should be reduced to match. Water lawns, shrubs etc thoroughly once every three to four weeks when there's no rain. Water winter vegetables and annual color in beds and containers as needed, up to a couple times per week depending on weather.

Clean up frost-damaged perennial tops, and even those that have not been killed by frost can be cut back so mulch can be replenished to protect roots when it gets colder. Ornamental grasses can still provide aesthetic value after they turn brown, so they can be left for the structure and interest they provide but be sure to cut down to the ground in late winter before new green growth grows up.

Winter is a great time of year to work on soil improvement. It can be physically demanding but very simple. Just remember the phrase 'compost once, mulch forever.' Any spots in the yard that need rejuvenation, or any new beds or gardens that will be added in the spring, should be tilled up to loosen and aerate the heavy soil. Incorporate organic matter (well-finished compost) to maximize the tilling step and allow the soil to stay loosened and porous instead of settling back into compaction. Roots need to 'breathe' and allowing oxygen to penetrate into the soil more readily can make a huge difference in plant health and growth. And organic matter provides important nutrients and provides many crucial functions for healthy plant growth.

December through January is also a good opportunity to prune shade trees. Wait until it cools down more to prune oaks, to ensure that the nitidulid beetle that can spread oak wilt disease is dormant. Don't remove more than a third of the canopy in one year, unless it's dead wood – like ash trees heavily damaged in the February 2021 winter storm.

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). In a nutshell, it means to use all available control methods instead of only resorting to chemical use, and also preventing pests in the first place. 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. Visit the website earthkind.tamu.edu and take the Earth-Kind challenge!

Holiday Plants



One day it feels like fall again and the next it's very wintry cold – plants can have a hard time with drastic changes in weather, and sudden drops in temperature from warm to cold can cause stress in plants like newly-planted lawns – they do better with gradual changes so they can enter dormancy before it gets extremely cold. But we can't change the weather so just try to provide good care in the ways we are able, such as applying thick mulch to beds, don't fertilize too close to winter dormancy and water when there's no rain for several weeks. The recent long soaking rain was very helpful for plants!

Now that it's December outdoor gardening is slowing down (though we can still plant cool season color like pansies and plant winter vegetables such as broccoli and lettuce), but it's a great time to utilize plants inside the home to add festive greenery and color. Poinsettias are the iconic flower for Christmas, though they are a tropical plant and need some care to keep them full and beautiful all season long. Choose a plant that looks large for the pot and is thick and full. The colorful part, called bracts, which are modified leaves that surround the true flower, should be fully colored to the edge and not have green on them. Keep them away from drafts and water them properly but don't overdo it - wait until the soil starts to dry out at the top of the root ball before watering. When needed, soak thoroughly in a sink with the decorative wrapper taken off. Let it drain well then place the wrapper back on.

Christmas cactus is a wonderful house plant that can live permanently in the home and rebloom year after year. In nature, it lives hanging up on jungle tree branches and prefers light, porous potting media mixed with sand and leafmold. After it finishes blooming for the season, water when the rootball dries out pretty thoroughly – don't water too frequently. Fertilize with a balanced fertilizer during the spring and summer season and keep at a temperature between 70-80 degrees. Mist the plant occasionally with a water bottle to increase humidity around the plant.

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.





UPCOMING EVENTS

December 2022

Thursday, December 8, 2pm-4pm

PPC Seminar - Growing and Utilizing Herbs

Location: Texas A&M Agrilife Extension Office, 113 W. Beauregard, San Angelo

Cost: \$20

Speakers: Courtney Redman, Allison Watkins - County Extension Agents

Hosted by the People/Plant Connection; Join us for a discussion on what herbs grow well in the Concho Valley, when to plant and how to have the best success - as well as how to use them in recipes. To reserve a spot [Click Here](#) or call Susan Stanfield at 325-656-3104

Friday, December 16, 12pm-1pm

Lunch N Learn Class - Year-Round Landscape Color

Location: Texas A&M Agrilife Extension Office, 113 W. Beauregard, San Angelo

Cost: \$5

Speaker: Allison Watkins - County Extension Agent, Horticulture

Hosted by the PPC; Join us for a discussion about annuals and perennials for the landscape to provide color all year long. 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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