



Concho Valley

January 2023

HORTICULTURE UPDATE

Starting from Seed

Knowing how to grow your own food is a great skill to have and is fun to do. There's a unique satisfaction that comes from serving a meal with ingredients from the garden! When spring arrives there will be an assortment of vegetable transplants available at nurseries to continue gardening efforts but now is a good time to plan ahead and start transplants from seeds inside. Starting from seed has several benefits, including a lower expense and more variety. Check out seed displays at local nurseries and garden centers or try ordering from seed catalogs and see how wide the selection is.

Some seeds work well when sowed directly into the planting bed in the spring time, but starting early indoors can increase success. January is a good time to order seeds for February sowing, to allow enough time to germinate and develop a good root system. Then the transplants will need time to harden off outside before planting.

Start with high quality, fine-textured potting mix (peat moss-based, not garden soil). When dealing with tiny seedlings it is important to keep everything as clean and sterile as possible, as they are more sensitive and susceptible to diseases and pests. So use fresh potting mix for growing seedlings, not old/reused potting mix.

Almost anything that can hold potting mix can be used to start seeds, but again it needs to be clean. Sterilize pots with 10% bleach solution before starting. Seeds starting trays can be purchased at local nurseries and garden centers, or improvise with egg cartons, cups, milk cartons etc. Punch holes in the bottom so that water can drain and place a tray underneath to catch the excess water.

Seeds packets should indicate the optimal germination conditions, but in general seeds need soil that is damp and warm but not too hot. An air temperature of about 75 degrees in the day and 65 at night is good. Provide ample light for the seedlings to grow well, and begin transplanting into individual pots after the first true leaves are formed. Allow a strong, deep root system to grow, then harden off outdoors before planting in the landscape or garden. This just means to gradually expose the plants to the elements outside while they are still in their containers – first place in part shade or filtered light, then into full sun for a period of time, then in full sun all day for a few days to allow the plant to transition from being grown indoors to planted outdoors. The average last frost in the Concho Valley is around late March, but keep always an eye on the weather. We never know if spring will come early or we will be hit with a surprise late frost.

January To-Do's

- Plant bare root fruit trees
- Prune shade trees if needed
- Need to move a plant in the yard? Now is the time - while dormant. Works best if the plant is young and small
- Order seeds from catalogs and online for spring

Pecan Update

2022 was a tough year for pecan production! Trees were overproductive the previous year - that combined with the lack of rainfall meant there were not many pecans produced. Let's hope for a better year in 2023

Pruning Shrubs



I am often asked 'when is the best time to prune shrubs?' My first tip is to choose shrubs that don't need frequent pruning. Select dwarf shrubs for around the home that grow to about three to four feet tall and let them stay in their natural form. It saves a lot of time and effort! Some recommended selections for the Concho Valley include dwarf yaupon holly, dwarf Indian hawthorn and dwarf nandina. Over time though, even dwarf shrubs can get overgrown. Whether you prefer a very formal look and enjoy shaping shrubs into hedges or spheres, or have old overgrown shrubs that need to be rejuvenated, late winter is a good time of year to prune many types of shrubs – just not those that bloom in the early spring.

The dormant season is ideal for pruning because it is right before new spring growth. Pruning at the 'wrong' time of year usually won't kill or even damage a shrub, but if done repeatedly every year it can weaken the plant. Early spring flowering trees and shrubs like Indian hawthorn and redbud should not be pruned until after they finish flowering or many of the flowers will be lost.

For older shrubs that are overgrown and need to be rejuvenated, a pruning process called gradual renewal might be helpful. Remove up to one-third of the oldest, tallest branches – cut them back almost to the ground, right now before new growth starts. This will stimulate fresh new growth, and the process can be repeated each year until the shrub is back into the desired condition.

One final pruning tip – don't top crape myrtles. Topping is an unnecessary and improper pruning practice that is not good for any kind of tree or shrub and is done to crape myrtles too often. Topping does not increase or improve flower production – in fact, it can delay or decrease flowering through stress and damage it causes to the plant.

Plant Spotlight

Chinquapin Oak

Quercus muehlenbergii

Need to plant a new shade tree? There are still many Arizona Ash trees that were killed or damaged in the winter storm of 2021 that need to be replaced. Choose a tree that is recommended for the area, check out the website <https://texastreeplanting.tamu.edu/> for ideas. Chinquapin oak is a wonderful choice for many yards!



Better Soil for Happier Plants



This is not new information to very many, but the soil in the Concho Valley is hard to dig in! Much of the soil is heavy, hard and rocky – if it's hard to dig with a shovel, imagine the struggle plant roots have trying to grow. Some homeowners are lucky to have loose, rich soil but most of us will have better luck with landscaping and gardening if we put soil management as a top priority.

Of course, there are plants that thrive in and prefer rocky, heavy soil without organic matter – if the types of plants you want to grow are desert plants that prefer lean conditions, don't bother with trying to amend the soil. But for turfgrass, vegetable gardens, traditional shrub and flower beds, etc. - organic matter is the key to a good start.

The foundation to good soil management is simple - incorporate compost any time new plants are added. Till or dig up the plot and add three inches 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. Overtilling can be damaging to soil structure, so don't re-till the soil every season. But when starting a new bed, lawn, or vegetable garden, the addition of compost will improve soil quality.

After planting, keep a three- to four-inch-deep layer of organic mulch maintained in the beds. Organic mulch, like shredded hardwood or cedar mulch will provide many benefits to the plants; it will help conserve water, moderate soil temperature, and prevent weeds. As time goes by, it will slowly break down and decompose into additional organic matter that will continue to improve soil. Just remember the phrase "compost once, mulch forever" and replenish mulch every year as it shrinks.

Well-managed soil can reduce or even eliminate the need for fertilizers in many landscape scenarios. Overuse of fertilizers is harmful to the environment, and the first step to fertilize correctly is to simply do a soil test through Texas A&M. Many homeowners apply fertilizer on a set schedule, but if there are already enough nutrients in the soil, additional nutrients are unnecessary. Visit <http://soiltesting.tamu.edu/> and use the "Urban Soil Submittal Form" to send in a soil sample. The report may indicate that no fertilizer is needed, or if some is needed the report will show specifically what nutrients to apply and how much.

Winter Clean-Up

The first hard freeze of winter was much later than average this year, but it finally hit (hard!) and killed perennial tops and triggered dormancy for lawns. February will be here before you know it and it's a good time of year to cut back freeze-damaged perennials as well as give a 'haircut' to other landscape plants to keep them growing vigorous and to stay dense and attractive. For example, spreading/mounding plants like rosemary, artemisia and santolina tend to grow out away from their original planting point, leaving a bare unsightly section in the center. Cutting them back significantly this time of year helps the plants stay more compact and beautiful. Semi-evergreen plants like *Salvia greggii* and roses benefit from a trim in late winter to help with strong spring growth and to keep them tidy and healthy-looking. Cut them back about 25% to 50%, depending on how healthy their existing stems are. The more stressed and unsightly they are, the more they should be cut back.

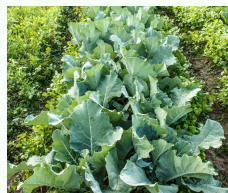
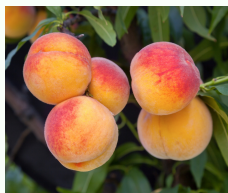
Old shrubs that are overgrown and not as attractive as they used to look can be rejuvenated with 'gradual renewing' pruning. Remove a third of the oldest, tallest branches – cut them back almost to the ground, right now before new growth starts. This will stimulate fresh new growth, and the process can be repeated each year until the shrub is back into the desired condition.

Evergreen groundcovers can also benefit from a winter trimming, it will help them stay thick as well as neat and tidy. Asian Jasmine is a popular and common groundcover, for good reason – it's a nice size and texture, is fairly easy to grow, can handle shade, and doesn't need tons of water. A severe trim (as low as six inches) can help it grow back denser and thicker in the spring, but will cause it to look ugly for a while. A hedge trimmer is best, and a string trimmer can work but is more uneven and can accidentally dig up runners.

Mondo grass can be mowed once a year with a mower at the highest setting (no lower than four inches) to keep it looking dense and healthy. It also will look rough until spring growth fills it back in. Neither mondo grass or Asian Jasmine need any trimming to keep a more informal, natural look, but if they are damaged and need to be rejuvenated, or if a formal look is preferred, trimming now can help achieve that.



What to Plant in January



January might seem like the time of year with the least amount of gardening to do, but there's actually quite a bit that can be planted now, including a few things that January is the best month for. Bare-root plants like fruit trees, pecans and roses must be planted during the dormant season and right now is prime time for getting them in the ground. Container-grown can be planted year-round and are easier to get established, but there are cost savings that come with choosing bare-root plants. It's also a great time of year to plant onions, asparagus and other winter vegetables like kale, spinach, cabbage, beets, brussel's sprouts, carrots and lettuce. And soon it will be time to get potatoes planted, around February. So take advantage of some of the nice-weather days that we have throughout the winter and get some food planted!

Some of the popular fruit trees that can be grown in the Concho Valley include apples, pears, peaches, plums, apricots and pomegranates. Visit <https://tomgreen.agrilife.org/horticulture/> to see a list of recommended varieties. Fruit trees need well drained soil so plant in a large raised bed if soil is heavy and a one-foot deep hole doesn't drain within 24 hours.

For help with growing vegetables, visit <https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/vegetable/>. Check out the fact sheets on asparagus, onions, potatoes and cole crops. Onions are biennial, so if started by seed they take two years to produce a good-sized bulb. Transplants, also called onion sets, are a good way to grow full sized onions in one season instead of two years. Onion sets can be found in local nurseries, through mail order catalogs and online. Choose short day varieties for planting in the south – some examples include Granex, Crystal White, and Red Burgandy.

Asparagus is one of the few perennial vegetables and once established, will keep producing delicious spears to harvest every spring and fall for years to come. Purchase two-year old crowns from a local nursery and plant in a permanent spot in the landscape rather than a vegetable garden plot that will be tilled up regularly. Allow to grow without harvesting for a couple of years to develop a strong root system.

Cold Weather and Plants

The first freeze in the fall and last frost in the spring are generally the most urgent cold-weather episodes, but deep freezes and cold spells that can happen through the middle of winter may also have negative effects on plants. Call me a lazy gardener, but I tend to not worry about covering plants up in the winter. There are certainly circumstances that would call for it, such as tender vegetable plants that are still producing in the fall, or an unexpected late frost in the spring; but I typically try to let mother nature take her course and plant based on the season.

Choosing tough, cold tolerant landscape plants instead of tender or marginally hardy plants can help increase confidence that the landscape will make it through winter like a champ. And if there are favorite, beloved plants that are not especially cold hardy, and you want to try them anyway – go for it! Nothing says every plant must last forever or you're a failure; part of the fun of gardening is trying new things. But for foundation plants like shrubs, good plant selection can go a long way to keeping the yard looking happy, healthy and not having to replant every few years.

Here are a few things to keep in mind regarding cold weather. In the spring and fall, when unusually late or early freezes come around, the best way to cover a plant is to use frost cloth or row cover, and don't tuck it up around the plant stem. Covers actually don't insulate from the frost but slow the plant's cooling by utilizing heat trapped in the soil earlier in the day. At sunset, drape the cloth loosely over the plant, tent-style. Try to cover as much ground as possible to utilize more radiant heat rising during the night.

For large, permanent ornamental plants that are more prone to freeze damage, like palm trees, pittosporum, and oleander, try to plant them in more protected areas of the yard, or warmer 'microclimates,' such as protected from the north wind and up close to the home to receive radiant warmth.

Tender perennials such as Pride of Barbados, hibiscus, and lantana can greatly benefit from a thick layer of mulch placed over the roots at the beginning of winter. Mulch helps insulate the roots and can sometimes even mean the difference between coming back the next spring or not. For more information on plants and cold weather, visit <https://tomgreen.agrilife.org/horticulture/> and click on "Frosts and Freezes."



UPCOMING EVENTS

January 2023

Tuesdays February through May, 12pm-3pm

Master Gardener Training Class

Location: Tom Green County Extension Office, San Angelo

Cost: \$225

Contact the Extension Office at 325-659-6528 for info or email Allison at aewatkins@ag.tamu.edu

Thursday, January 12, 2pm-4pm

PPC Seminar - Trees in Your Landscape

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

Cost: \$20

Speaker: Allison Watkins

Hosted by the People Plant Connection; Learn all about planting and training young trees, and caring for and pruning mature landscape trees. To reserve a spot [Click Here](#) or call Susan Stanfield at 325-656-3104.

Friday, January 13, 12pm-1pm

Lunch N Learn Class - Landscape Design for Home Safety

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

Cost: \$5

Speaker: Allison Watkins

Hosted by the PPC; Join us for a discussion on how landscape design can affect the safety of your home and how to reduce break-ins with plant placement, lighting, etc. 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:



Allison Watkins
Texas A&M AgriLife Extension
Tom Green County
113 W Beauregard
San Angelo, TX 76903
325-659-6528

The members of Texas A&M AgriLife will provide equal opportunities in programs and activities, education, and employment to all persons regardless of race, color, sex, religion, national origin, age, disability, genetic information, veteran status, sexual orientation or gender identity and will strive to achieve full and equal employment opportunity throughout Texas A&M AgriLife.