

THE FORT BEND GARDENER



HORTICULTURE IN FORT BEND COUNTY

SPRING 2013

TEXAS A&M AGRI LIFE EXTENSION

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Contributions from:



FORT BEND COUNTY
Master Gardeners

Aggie Horticulture® 

**Fort Bend
Beekeepers
Assoc.** 

T E X A S
**Master
Naturalist**™ 

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Timely Topics: The Scoop on Mulch

By Boone Holladay, County Extension Agent-Horticulture

Mulch in your garden has many benefits, let's break it down and start with the rules. Apply a generous layer of mulch at a maximum depth of 4 inches twice a year, once in spring and again in fall. Tuck mulch around shrubs and trees, and sprinkle over the tops of dormant perennials. Do not "cone" or "volcano" mulch around the base of trees, simply level it to the crown of the plant, where the base of the trunk starts expanding out with the first layer of surface roots. Once applied, water the surface thoroughly, to disperse the smaller dusty particles into the soil.



Now let's discuss the benefits of mulching. Number one for me is weed control. Regularly having to pull weeds is not a reason why people enjoy gardening. A thick layer of mulch will stop germination of most of these pesky volunteers. Number two, is moisture retention. Mulch acts as a barrier between the sun and wind, holding natural rainfall and irrigation into the soil instead of it running off or evaporating. The third benefit of mulching is soil temperature moderation. Think of mulch like a cooler or a sweater. Plants are like people in this matter, they don't like such a range in body temperature. This effect on the roots can stress plants, thus having a negative impact on their growth. The fourth benefit of mulching is the replenishment of organic matter into the soil. Each season, the mulch from last year is breaking down into humus. This feeds microorganisms in the soil and they in turn release nutrients back to the plants, essentially adding free fertilizer to your garden.

So now you are standing in front of twenty options for mulch at your local garden center. "Which one do I choose?" you say. Basically, unless you have a preference for texture or color, all options are fair, with a couple exceptions. If your landscape is flat and prone to standing water, pine bark mulch is not your best bet. These nuggets will float and pile up in the lowest area. It is generally recommended to use locally sourced mulch products. Products labeled as native or hardwood mulch are generally locally sourced materials. This is the most environmentally conscientious choice. These local landscape by-products are saved from landfills and recycled back into local gardens. Also, if you have access to a truck, bulk purchase is cheaper and relieves our landfills from those plastic bags. So, if you haven't mulched yet for spring, now is your time.

Letter from a Monarch

By Diane Russell, Master Naturalist

I am a Monarch butterfly. I look fragile, and weigh less than a paper clip, but I can fly thousands of miles when I migrate from Canada to Mexico in the fall.



Every year there are fewer plants available as nurseries for my babies - the milkweeds (*Asclepias*). Pesticides and too many malls, highways, golf courses, and nice manicured lawns have all destroyed the plants I need for my lifecycle. Monarch numbers keep going down every year.

Just by planting a single milkweed in your yard, you will help and be rewarded with visits. We will entertain you with our beauty and we'll flutter past your children and enchant them. You can watch our little caterpillar babies chomp down the milkweed leaves, crawl away, turn into a chrysalis and then a beautiful adult Monarch. The milkweed will grow back and the cycle will continue. If you take the time to look for other native flowering plants for me and my cousins to eat, you'll be

rewarded with the sight of butterflies of all colors and sizes hanging out with your family. Your yard will be more fun than the zoo!

To learn more about us and what plants to get, check out my favorite website, www.monarchwatch.org/. In the meantime, go to a nursery that does NOT use pesticides. Pesticides kill butterflies and other good insects needed for pollination. Buy a Mexican milkweed (*Asclepias curassavica*) and plant it in your garden, I will visit you in the fall or spring as I migrate.

And if you want to get more active in your community, join my fans at Texas Master Naturalists, Coastal Prairie Chapter, txmn.org/coastal/.

Garden Humor

Grass is just a flower bed in waiting.

A weed is a plant that has mastered every survival skill except for learning how to grow in rows..

The difference between weeds and flowers is the weeds are the easiest ones to pull out.

Richmond Farmers Market - Fresh from our farms to you!

By Boone Holladay, County Extension Agent—Horticulture



If you haven't had a chance to visit the Richmond Farmers Market, you have been missing out. First off, you've missed out on the fresh seasonal produce that our region has traditionally been known for. According to market manager Liz Stegint, "Our farmers offer a variety of freshly harvested local greens and vegetables -- fresh Asian salad greens, lettuces, kale, salad mixes, onions, beets, turnips, fresh herbs and more. We also have locally grown vegetable and herb plants for your garden, local honey, and fresh free range eggs."

Secondly, you've been missing out on the opportunity to support local agriculture. Local fresh farm sales allow limited resource farmers a "piece of the pie" so to speak. The locally-produced food movement is making its way into our region and into the minds of consumers. Your support helps make this way of life sustainable for your local farmer.

Currently, the market is running every Friday afternoon from 2 pm to 6 pm one block West of the Brazos River in downtown Richmond, at the corner of Hwy 90 and 3rd Street. Starting the 5th of May, they will be kicking off a Sunday morning market from 10am to 2pm. The Sunday market will continue in line with spring "bumper" production yields.

Stop by the market and meet your farmer. Also, go online and "like" the market at [facebook.com/richmondfarmersmarket](https://www.facebook.com/richmondfarmersmarket) for information on what's fresh, additional market events, and for vendor applications. If you are producing food in the area and are interested in sales potential, affordable vendor space is available for locally grown fruits, vegetables, and other farm fresh products.

See you at the market!

Bees: Good Neighbors... Bad Roommates

By Jeff McMullan, Beekeeper,
Texas Master Naturalist



Hardly a day goes by without honey bees making the news. Public interest in “saving the bees” is high as a result of this (often alarming) media coverage. Knowledgeable

counsel and advice is important in dealing with honey bees since they make good neighbors but really bad roommates.

The honey bee colony has only one queen and her role is critical. She is the largest bee in the colony and lays the eggs that will sustain the colony population. She also emits scents (pheromones) that regulate colony unity. The queen is the colony’s only fully developed female. She may live four years or more. The colony workers, numbering 60,000 or more in a fully populated hive, are females as well, but not reproductively mature. These workers keep the hive clean and tidy, produce beeswax, build comb, tend the queen and her brood, make honey, etc. Newly emerged workers spend their first three weeks or so doing these chores inside the hive. Later they progress to guarding the hive entrance and then become “field bees” gathering nectar, pollen, water and plant resins for the hive. During the peak of honey flow, a worker may only live six weeks or so under a heavy burden of work to be done.

The drone (male honey bee) has a fascinating story. His mother, the queen, decides when the colony has sufficient resources in the spring to raise her sons who will pass her genes on to the next generation. The colony will be repaid the food and effort devoted to raising new workers. Raising new workers is like an investment for the colony but the drone’s only role is as mating partner for new queens. When the time is right, the queen seeks out bigger comb cells that the workers have prepared to produce their larger brothers. There she lays unfertilized eggs that will develop in to some 200 or so male drones. You read that right! Drones develop from unfertilized eggs (strange to us mammals, but not all that uncommon in the insect world). While not quite as large as the queen, the drones are barrel-shaped robust bees with large compound eyes like those of a dragonfly. The drone gather some 100 feet above the ground and circle

about giving off scents that attract newly emerged virgin queens. New queens are attracted to the drone congregation area and fly up to mate in flight with as many as 20 or more drones. After mating, the drones fall to the ground and die while the new queen returns to her colony to assume her role, perhaps never leaving over her life span of four or more years.

While the queen’s egg laying effort sustains colony numbers, new colonies are created by dividing in two or “swarming”: about half the population leaves with the queen in search of a new home. The swarm must find a suitable nest site to survive while the established colony that is left behind must nurture a new queen who hopefully survives a mating flight and returns to the colony. If both groups are successful, there are now two colonies instead of just one. Reproductive swarms usually happen in the springtime when forage is plentiful, so “swarm season” is right now. (“Absconding” is the term beekeepers use for entire colonies that “swarm”, abandoning their nest, usually due to pests or disease. Absconding can happen at any time of the year.)

A cluster of bees hanging from a tree limb or on a wooden fence are awaiting the return of scouts that will guide them to a new residence. The worst advice anyone can receive is “don’t worry, they’ll leave” since the rest of the sentence may well be “and move into your garage.”

Capturing swarms and introducing them into a hive is a basic beekeeping skill. A clustered swarm of bees in a tree or on a fence is hungry and anxious, so the beekeepers offer of a new home is often quickly accepted. If not the beekeeper’s managed hive, hopefully the bees will move into a hollow tree or maybe an abandoned birdhouse. If the colony moves into the wall of someone’s home, it’s not good for the people or the bees. Now there is a costly pest control problem not a beekeeping problem. Simply killing the bees leaves the wall full of dead bees and honey that must all be removed or the stench will be awful. The cavity must be filled (with material like fiberglass insulation) and caulked closed to discourage another colony from moving in (a common occurrence). And don’t forget the restoration, painting and cleanup. Few beekeepers are willing to tackle removals or “cutouts” and it is hard to find commercial services that will do the work. Honey bees make good neighbors but really bad roommates.



Seasonal Citrus Care

By Deborah Birge,
Citrus Specialist, Fort Bend
Master Gardeners

The following provides basic care and attention your citrus tree will require. This information will cover your newly planted tree and any established trees you may have.

1. Citrus does not require full sun but needs at least four hours daily. They perform quite well as an understory tree or one that receives only morning sun.
2. Move the mulch away from the trunk.
3. Take care of the graft union (where the rootstock and scion are joined). Any growth below this union is from the rootstock. Run your hand down this part of the trunk removing any growth.
4. The only pruning needed would be to remove crossing limbs, dead wood or if you were planning to control the height of the tree through pruning.
5. The first year young tree should be growing healthy roots. Remove producing blooms and fruit will drain its energy and weaken it for the long term.
6. Water your newly planted tree deeply once or twice a week, depending on rainfall, for a few weeks tapering off as you see the tree becoming established. Water deeply on a weekly basis, increasing the frequency should we have drought conditions again.
7. Do not fertilize. Your tree should use its energy establishing roots. When you fertilize, you are asking the tree to spend its energy on leaf and stem growth.
8. Citrus have very few pest or disease issues so no need to spray your tree unless you see problems.

Citrus is a relatively carefree fruit for homegrowers. With just a little basic care in the spring you are rewarded.

Visit www.fbmng.com to read the full article on Spring Care for Citrus.

Seasonal Garden Checklist: April

By Dr. William Welch,
Professor & Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service
Landscape Horticulturist

- Prune spring-flowering shrubs soon after flowering. Keep the natural shape of the plant in mind as you prune, and avoid excessive cutting except where necessary to control size.
- Removing spent flowers, trimming back excessive growth, and applying fertilizer to an established annual bed can do wonders towards rejuvenating and extending the life of the planting.
- As soon as azaleas have finished flowering, apply an acid type fertilizer at the rate recommended. Don't over fertilize, as azalea roots are near the surface and damage can occur. Water thoroughly after fertilizing.
- Seeds of amaranthus, celosia, cosmos, marigold, portulaca, zinnia and other warm-season annuals can be sown directly in the beds where they are to grow. Keep seeded areas moist until seeds germinate. Thin out as soon as they are large enough to transplant. Surplus plants can be transplanted to other areas.
- For instant color, purchase started annual plants. Select short, compact plants. Any flowers or flower buds should be pinched to give plants an opportunity to become established.
- Check new tender growth for aphids. A few can be tolerated, but large numbers should be controlled. Always follow label instructions on approved pesticides for control. Washing them off with a strong spray of water may be all that is necessary for adequate control.
- Many flower or vegetable seeds left over after planting the garden can be saved for the next season by closing the packets with tape or paper clips and storing in a sealed glass jar in your refrigerator.
- Start weeding early in the flower garden. Early competition with small plants can delay flowering. Mulch will discourage weed growth and make those that do come through easier to pull.

Watch newspapers and other publicity for information regarding wildflower trails, and open garden days. Plan to take a trip to enjoy beautiful gardens and trails that are abundant in many areas of Texas.

Spotlight

FBMG Demonstration Gardens

by Jane Gray,
Landscape Director
Fort Bend County Master Gardeners

One of the rewards of living in Fort Bend County is the bountiful spectrum of edible plants we can grow year round. The Fort Bend Master Gardeners maintain 4 acres of demonstration gardens at 1402 Band Road (adjacent to the fairgrounds) for the citizens of the county to visit.

Each month, one or more gardens will be highlighted. Since this is the time of year when many folks are planting vegetables, let us take a look at the Vegetable garden and the Edible Front Yard.

THE VEGETABLE GARDEN is located directly behind the Bud O'Shieles Community Center. Here you can observe raised bed gardening as well as row crops. The winter crops are being removed and spring crops are being planted. Visit this garden to get an idea about growing practices, variety selection, and weed reduction.



THE EDIBLE FRONT YARD demonstrates how to incorporate edible plants in an attractive way in your front-yard flower beds. Vegetables, herbs, and fruit trees are cleverly planted in with roses and other annuals and perennials in such a way that would pass most neighborhood deed restrictions. You will be surprised the variety of edible plants that can be grown in a beautiful garden setting.



Questions? Call our Master Gardener Hotline, 281-341-7068, email your hotline questions to FortBendmg@ag.tamu.edu, or come and visit anytime. Master Gardeners are there to answer questions and show you around on Wednesday mornings and the first Saturday morning of each month.

Online Garden Resources



The following links provide additional information for topics related to gardening and horticulture.

Aggie Horticulture:

Located news, events, and featured sites for horticulture:

<http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/>

Earthkind Landscaping

Learn to combine the best of organic and traditional gardening and landscaping principles:

<http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/earthkind/>

Plant Selection Tool

A searchable database provides an opportunity to select plant materials for your garden:

<http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/earthkind/plant-selector/>

Rainwater Harvesting

Information about rainwater harvesting and other water-related issues:

<http://rainwaterharvesting.tamu.edu/>

Agrilife Bookstore

Online resource for Horticulture & Agricultural print publication:

<http://agrillifebookstore.org/>

Fort Bend Master Gardener Hotline

Contact the hotline with questions about plants, insects, garden pests, problems with plants or trees:

Email: FortBendMG@ag.tamu.edu

Phone: (281) 341-7068

Fort Bend Master Gardener Website

Information about Master Gardening, events, and gardening articles:

<http://www.fbmng.com>

Beekeepers Association

Interested in bees or have a bee problem visit this site for information:

<http://fortbendbeekeepers.org/>

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The Texas A&M University System, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the County Commissioners Courts of Texas Cooperating. Educational programs conducted by the Texas AgriLife Extension serve people of all ages regardless of socioeconomic level, race, color, sex, religion, handicap or national origin. Individuals with disabilities who require an auxiliary aid, service or accommodation in order to participate in any Extension activities, are encouraged to contact the County Extension Office for assistance five days prior to activity.

DATES TO REMEMBER

FBMG Monthly Educational Programs
Third Thursday of the month, 7:00 p.m.

Saturdays with the Fort Bend Master Gardeners
First Saturday of the month 9:00-11:00 a.m.

Fort Bend Beekeepers Meeting
Second Tuesday of the month, 7:00 p.m.

Wetlands - Coastal Prairie Master Naturalists
May 2, 2013

Texas Water Star Conference
May 18, 2013, 8:00 a.m.

Small Acreage Crops Lecture Series
May 23, 2013, 8:30 a.m.

For full information on events call 281-342-3034 or visit
<http://fortbend.agrilife.org>
Or <http://fbmg.com>