

Henderson County Master Gardener

“The Inside Dirt”

Mexican Sunflower A Shining Beacon For Butterflies Wayne Stafford

Last October we toured Sharon Barrett’s garden. The deep orange-red beauty of her Mexican sunflowers were very impressive. Its a tough plant that can take the summer heat. The Mexican sunflower is not a true sunflower, but gets the name from the bright yellow center of the flower, that looks like a beacon calling butterflies to feast.

Investigating its botanical origins reveals that it is of the Asteraceae family. Its Latin name is *Tithonia rotundifolia* (ti-THO-nee-a ro-tun-dih-FOH-tee-uh.) Although the Mexican sunflower is an annual plant it readily reseeds. It prefers sun but can tolerate filtered light and partial shade. The Mexican sunflower is quite heat and drought tolerant but looks best if not allowed to remain dry too long. Being a tall plant the Mexican Sunflower belongs on the backrow of your flower bed. There it can host butterflies

during the summer and into late fall.



The seed catalogs list a variety of cultivars. One called “Torch”, the biggest Mexican Sunflower, may get as high as 6 feet. Although it is beautiful and the most popular of the tall varieties it may be “too tall” from the description. It would probably fall over in one of our summer rain storms. “Goldfinger”, a shorter cultivar, is

described as a three to four-foot plant, with deep red-orange petals and a large golden center. It seems to be a better choice for smaller gardens. A third choice is “Fiesta Del Sol”, described as a compact plant, growing to two to

three feet in height, with blooms two to three inches in diameter This variety has a large yellow center. It may be the earliest and longest blooming Mexican sunflower.

Master Gardener plant guru, Nina Ellis, reported she started some seed in January. She wants to get them out when the warm weather arrives here in East Texas. Sounds like a good idea, to get an early start. The planting instructions say to plant in the sunlight covered lightly with ¼ inch of soil. Germination can be expected in 10 to 14 days. Then ole.

January Garden Notebook Nina Ellis

As I toured my garden this morning after feeding my retired horses, I was pleasantly surprised to have blooming plants greet me. Nearby the backdoor the winter honeysuckle, *Lonicera fragrantissima*, (Texas native) is in full bloom and perfuming the air throughout the garden. The honeybees were busily gathering pollen and nectar. Across the drive the pearl bush (at ten feet it’s not really a bush) is beginning its display of clusters of tiny white flowers. Then I spied the *Narcissus pseudonarcissus*, often called Lent Lily, as it is the first of its family to bloom in spring. It is a wild European daffodil introduced to the South by early settlers. Mine were growing here in 1964 with no help from man. Today they are very much in demand because of their ability to bloom reliably every year. Sad to say they are not to be found in the trade. The small-flowered narcissus, the only ones that can be counted on to bloom every spring in this area, are in bud down among the foliage. Along the drive the bright pink flowering quince is showing off in all her glory. This plant is a true “pass along” as it was given to me from a friend’s garden. Nearby the “paper white” narcissus is asking to be noticed. One cannot help but seek them out. Their “fragrance” calls to you.

Enjoying the early morning sun I continued my tour of the garden. With so little rainfall this past year I didn’t expect to find much in the way of returning annuals. Larkspur,

various strains of poppies, standing cypress (native plant), bluebonnets, old-fashioned petunias and tick seed, are all up and growing vigorously. After such poor stands of my reseeding annuals last year I was fearful I would have to start them over. Yet here they are! I do believe seeds can foretell the coming weather. I take this as a sign of a better gardening year than the one just past.

Searching out the perennials among the fallen leaves I am excited to find the New England asters emerging, Georgia asters, Texas betony, verbena, the crinums, rain lilies, Gerber daisies and Brazos penstemon all looking forward to adding their beauty to the garden. Of the different penstemons planted in the garden, I find the Brazos to have been the least affected by the prolonged drought of this past summer. They received no supplemental water, yet here they are producing new plants and preparing to bloom. Of course our native columbine, *Aquilegia canadensis*, has been green all winter along with prairie phlox that is sending up new plants in the herb garden.

The myriad violets are mere crowns having been a favorite snack of the deer. The treasured Roman hyacinths and Byzantine gladiolus have suffered the same fate. I am afraid my oak-leaf hydrangea will not bloom again this year as it blooms on last year's growth and none is left after being discovered by deer. I will add that I did enjoy watching a doe with twin fawns all summer long.

Take a little time from your busy day, tour your garden and discover the treasures awaiting you.

My Dream Peggy Wyatt

When my husband and I retired and moved to our farm in East Texas, we built a home and I got to plan my dream yard. There were three non-negotiable requirements; no grass to mow, lots of blooming plants for color, and a pond for koi and goldfish. Our home was built on top of a hill that had lost all its topsoil, and was nothing but absolutely bare ground.

Seven years later, I have learned many lessons on the path to making my dream yard come true.

Lesson 1. There is a good reason for amending your soil before you plant. There are parts of my yard that still perform poorly because

I just couldn't wait.

- Lesson 2. All plants get twice as large as you think they will — even dwarf varieties. I am already starting to have to thin out trees I planted in my yard because I couldn't imagine that tiny seedling would now be taller than the house.
- Lesson 3. There is no such thing as a low-maintenance yard. Since I didn't want to mow grass, I planted groundcover. It does just what its name implies, whether you want it there or not.
- Lesson 4. There is a weed for every season, and they all love my yard. It gives you a true respect for the tenacity of Mother Nature to be sure every square inch of ground is covered with something that even atomic bombs can't kill.
- Lesson 5. There is no feeling more wonderful than the day you find earthworms, toads, and geckos in your yard. It is like a pat on the back and a sincere "well done" from the person you admire most.
- Lesson 6. Never believe what the plant catalogs say. — they were not written by Texans. Our heat and humidity are deadly.
- Lesson 7. If you see someone with bruises on the top of her feet, she is a gardener. If you can see her knees, she has bruises there too.
- Lesson 8. Bulbs are a miracle straight from God. How can so much reliable beauty come from such an ugly package.
- Lesson 9. Soil tests are worth the trouble. (This information is straight from the Aggie Bible).
- Lesson 10. My favorite horticultural activity is the one I happen to be doing at the time. From planting annuals in the spring to pruning in the winter, nothing else keeps your spirit on an even keel like keeping your feet (or knees) firmly planted on the soil.

A Word From the President

Sharon Barrett

When I first knew that I was going to be your president for 2006 I began to think about all the things we could do to make this a good year. When I get excited about something my mind tends to forget about such constraints as clock hours, physical stamina, funding sources and manpower. I allowed myself a couple of weeks to just flow with the ideas and then settled down to the reality of setting attainable goals. I do believe in goals and I see merit in setting reasonable rather than lofty ones, though lofty ones surely have a place.

I think the main goal I've set for us is to "be progress". "Be progress". That's not my phrase. I attend the Texas Workforce Commission Annual Conference each year. In November, Dean Lindsey spoke on the book he has written about "being progress". The concept is pretty simple but the impact of it can be far reaching. Networking is a big catch phrase these days and in the process of networking or just daily contact with people, the goal is to consider how to "be progress" for the other person. When it gets right down to it I suppose we are either "being progress" to those we spend time with or we are just taking up valuable time they could spend on something else. I choose progress. I want us to "be progress" for each other, for the programs we support and for the community at large. It doesn't have to be spectacular progress; it can be adequate progress. Progress is the opposite of regress and better than status quo. Progress is saying something supportive or, at the very least, non-committal, rather than tearing down the well intentioned work of someone trying to do an honorable job. Progress is giving someone a verbal pat on the back for good effort; it's taking time to admire the result of a project. Progress is touching something or someone and leaving it better than it was. Progress is moving forward.

Moving forward. That's where I'm going. Will you come along?

Plan Drip Irrigation Now

Rick Hirsch
County Extension Agent
Henderson County

Spring is fast approaching and many are making plans for their spring vegetable gardens. Now is the time to plan a way to supplement the rainfall we depend upon. The best technique to water vegetable gardens is drip irrigation. Drip is controlled, slow application of water to soil. The water flows under low pressure through plastic pipe or hose laid along each row of plants. The main reasons that drip irrigation is most successful are that soil moisture remains relatively constant, and air, as essential as water is to the plant root system, is always available.

Other watering methods, such as flood or sprinkler create a wide fluctuation in the soil water content, temperature and aeration of the soil. The greatest thing about drip irrigation is that it only requires about half as much water as furrow or sprinkler irrigation because the water is applied drop-by-drop to the plant roots.

The financial investment in a drip irrigation system is reasonably small if the system is well planned, assembled and installed. Savings on water and increased yield and quality can more than pay for the costs of parts to install and maintain a drip system.

A typical house faucet puts out three to five gallons per minute. The volume limits the area that can adequately be irrigated using a drip system to not more than 1,500 to 2,000 sq. ft. For best operation locate the area to be irrigated as close to the faucet as possible. If it is too far away it is difficult to get enough volume to run the drip system properly.

Take time to give this idea some thought and visit some garden centers that handle drip irrigation equipment to check out options. With drip irrigations, you will most likely have the best vegetable garden you have ever had.

Size First, Then Color, Selecting The Correct Crape Myrtle

Wayne Stafford

How many crape myrtles have you seen that are misshapen because they have been cut back to keep them a certain size? (See below.) There is no excuse for doing this. Crape myrtles come in many sizes and many colors. Just like buying clothes select size then select the color.

Crape myrtle was first introduced into the United States from China in about 1747. Its scientific name is *Lagerstroemia indica*, (la-ger-STREEM-ee-uh) (IN-dih-kuh.) It became widely adapted over the South. Because of its wide color range and hardy growth, it is known as the “Lilac of the South.”



Powdery mildew is a problem on many of the older varieties. The National Arboretum introduced stock from *Lagerstriemia fauriei*, (la-ger-STREEM-ee-uh) (FAU-ree-eye) that is resistant to powdery mildew. This variety also has some interesting bark coloration. These variations were used to develop hardier and more interesting plants.

The National Arboretum has introduced 30 new varieties providing a choice of sizes, color, shapes, to suit any landscape need. When searching for information on crape myrtle there are three URL's chock full of information and pictures.

From the National Arboretum:

<http://www.usna.usda.gov/PhotoGallery/CrapemyrtleGallery/> and

<http://www.usna.usda.gov/PhotoGallery/CrapemyrtleGallery/CrapeTable.html>

From Clemson University:

<http://www.clemson.edu/crapemyrtle/>

Size begins with miniature-compact varieties such as the “Pocomoke”, and “Chickasaw” which only get up 30 inches in height. A nice mid-size variety, “Caddo”, has a

mature height of 5 to 10 feet tall; my favorite is “Tonto”, a beautiful fuchsia color. Other varieties will get up to a height of 20 to 25 feet. Just select the size for your need. A good initial choice yields a beautiful plant with the size and shape that nature intended.

Seeds of Remeberance

Terri Hudson

I really had hoped to have something really meaningful written to accompany the seed-sharing, but my muse is in the South of France, I think. The basic gist of what I feel about those seeds is something like this:

To me, everything about seeds is optimistic; studying catalogs, placing orders, planning the garden, and the ultimate act of optimism, touching seed to soil. It all screams, “There will be a tomorrow! There is a future!”

That Neal could still order seeds tended to feed my intrinsic optimism — I believed he could and would get better. My heart refused to abandon hope; and seeds played a part in that.

My wish in sharing Neal's seeds is that some bits of hope and optimism will be restored to his spirit by those who plant the seeds he did not. I truly cannot wait to hear the experiences those seeds bring and hope that they provide much pleasure, and, maybe, just a bit of happiness.

I guess that about sums it up. Use those seeds as you wish — share, donate, plant — as the mood strikes. I hope you will remember Neal fondly as little green things sprout in the garden.

Please give my best to the MGs. Assure them that I am doing fine and miss them all. A woman in my office has a friend who recently completed her MG training, so I even have a Tarrant County intern contact! She will surely lead me to some meetings!

Editor's note:

Terri Hudson is a past-president of Henderson County Master Gardeners. Her husband, Neal Poore, died this past year. Neal was a great vegetable gardener and over the last few years shared not only his expertise but also his tomato and pepper seedlings with Master Gardeners. At a recent meeting Terri shared the seeds left from Neal's gardening efforts. I shall treasure mine and remember Neal fondly.

6^h Annual Master Gardener Spring Conference

Neil Sperry, popular radio host and publisher of Garden Magazine, will be the guest speaker at the Henderson County Master Gardener Spring Conference on Thursday evening, April 6, 2006 at the Cain Center in Athens, 915 S. Palestine, where he'll debut his not-to-be-missed, "*Fun, Fact and Fantasies of Texas Gardening*."

Mr. Sperry's daily and weekend radio broadcasts are heard on more than 60 stations statewide via the Texas State Network. In addition to being owner and publisher of Garden Magazine, he is the author of Neil Sperry's Complete Guide to Texas Gardening, the 4th best-selling gardening hardback in American history. Featured weekly in 20 Texas newspapers, including the Fort Worth Star Telegram and the San Antonio Express News, his awards include: American Garden Communicator of the Year by the American Association of Nurserymen, Man of the Year in Texas Agriculture by Texas Cooperative Extension of Texas A&M and top national awards from the Garden Writers Association of America for his book, magazine, radio and television programs. He was also inducted into the Texas Radio Hall of Fame on October 18, 2003.

Attendees will have the opportunity to bid in a silent auction, shop an extensive selection of favorite plants at the annual plant sale and have their gardening questions answered by Certified Master Gardeners. Doors will open at 6:00 pm; a catered dinner featuring Danny's BBQ will begin at 6:30 pm and Mr. Sperry's presentation will follow. The evening will close with drawings for various door prizes donated by local businesses.

Advance tickets may be purchased for \$20 from any Henderson County Master Gardener or at the Henderson County Cooperative Extension Office in Athens. A limited number of \$25 tickets will be available at the door. For more information, or tickets, call the Henderson County Extension Office at (903) 675-6130.

The Henderson County Master Gardener Association is sponsored by the Henderson County Cooperative Extension Service which is part of the Texas A&M University System. Its objectives are to increase knowledge of gardening to its members and the general

public, and to provide the community with information on good gardening practices.

Arboretum Demonstration Garden

Sharon Barrett, President

It was a vision for the members of the first class of Henderson County Master Gardeners in 2000 that their work would eventually lead to a home site for a demonstration garden. The 2001 class joined in that dream and work was begun toward that goal. In 2004 an invitation was extended by the Arboretum to make our garden on their property, and our organization voted to accept that offer. On Friday, Feb. 3, 2006, the agreement as drawn by the Arboretum Board was signed. We are now official!

Gwen McGlaun, a member of that first 2000 class, has been appointed to chair the new project and has begun work to assemble a team. After some site work offered by the Arboretum is completed the plot will be staked off and ground work will begin. Gwen has also begun gathering information for the Earth-Kind Rose trials which we also voted to do in the hope that we can begin our demonstration garden with that project.

While we hope that all our members will want to participate in the new garden, we also know that it will take careful planning and coordination to make it the success we want it to be. We encourage everyone to offer their expertise and talents to the appropriate team leaders so that all the work done there will integrate with the master plan and purpose of the garden, and we will all have a part in its continued success.

Congratulations Master Gardeners on a goal accomplished.

Henderson County Master Gardener

<http://agfacts.tamu.edu/D5/Henderso/hc-mg.htm>

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If you have received this newsletter in error, or to provide us with a change of address, please contact the Henderson County Extension Office at (903)-675-6130.