TEXAS MASTER GARDENER
TEXAS A&M AGRILIFE EXTENSION
Bastrop County

What's Growing On?

BASTROP COUNTY MASTER GARDENER ASSOCIATION

April 2026

Red Imported Fire Ants

By Wizzie Brown



Red imported fire ants are a non-native species that originate from South America. They were accidentally introduced in Mobile, AL in the 1930s. Ships used soil for ballast as a method of stabilization, and it's thought that fire ants were unknowingly in ballast removed from South American ships. From Mobile, fire ants spread in the southern U.S., entering Texas in the 1950's.

Fire ants bite *and* sting and can sting multiple times. The stinger, located on the tip of the abdomen, injects venom that can cause pain, burning and/or redness. The sting area develops into a small pustule within a few days. The pustule may itch and is sterile, unless it is broken open by scratching, which then may lead to secondary infection. Some people may develop an allergic reaction to fire ant stings/venom. Allergic reactions can vary in severity with some causing life-threatening anaphylaxis. If you have concerns over non-typical reactions after being stung by fire ants, seek medical attention.

Ways to manage fire ants can be broken into two basic categories: broadcast treatments and individual mound treatments. Individual mound treatments treat one mound at a time and are labor intensive, requiring you to search and find every fire ant mound for treatment and can result in more pesticide being applied to the environment. Broadcast treatments spread product (granular or bait) over a large area using specialized equipment.

With any pesticide treatment, *read and follow all label instructions*. Make sure to water in the pesticide **if the label instructs you to do so**. Failure to water in chemicals when recommended by the label does an inadequate job of killing the ants. Baits should not be watered in or used before a rainfall event; baits will not be picked up by ants if they get wet.

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Downtown Bastrop Planters Loving Spring Rains

By Joni Groom

We recently replaced most of the center plants in the downtown planters that Chris Toth overwintered in his greenhouse for us. The mild weather and recent rains have the planters looking lush and full! We have a few spots we need to fill and our next installment day will be the April 14th when we start working on planting the beds and containers at the city utility office.







Volunteering

Master Gardeners volunteer in the community to teach others about horticulture. We follow the research-based recommendations of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension. Members who complete 50 hours of volunteer service in the year after training earn the designation "Texas Master Gardener." We use our title only when engaged in Texas A&M AgriLife Extension activities.

Cedar Creek Butterfly Garden

By Dale Weiss, BCMGA President



As part of our ongoing BCMGA Garden Spotlight Series, we're taking a closer look at the Cedar Creek Butterfly Garden—another example of how thoughtful gardening can make a lasting impact.

Tucked just down the road at Cedar Creek Park, something special is taking root—something that goes beyond a garden bed or a morning workday. It's a place where learning, community, and stewardship come together in a very real way.

Originally created in 2009 as one of our first full-scale demonstration gardens, the project was led by Master Gardener Marshall Smith. The garden was designed as a welcoming habitat for pollinators and other wildlife. After a catastrophic flood destroyed the original garden, the project was lovingly re-created several years later by Master Gardener Dorothy Skarnalus. Her dedication ensured that this important space was not only restored, but continues to thrive today, led by Master Gardener Marianna Hobbs, as a vital ecological resource within Cedar Creek Park.



The purpose of the garden has always been clear: to provide food, water, and shelter for monarchs and other butterflies, honeybees, solitary bees, birds, and a wide variety of wildlife. The garden is planted predominantly with native and well-adapted species, chosen for their ability to support local ecosystems, and no pesticides are used—allowing pollinators to flourish naturally.

Walk through the garden and you'll find a thoughtful mix of plants doing real work—fennel, mistflower (both blue and white), goldenrod, Cowpen Daisy, Obedient Plant, Coral Vine, and a variety of salvias—each chosen to attract and sustain pollinators throughout the seasons. It's not just pretty to look at. Every plant has a purpose, and every visit offers a chance to learn something new about how nature works together.



But what really makes Cedar Creek stand out is the people behind it.

On any given Tuesday morning, you'll find volunteers working side by side—pulling weeds, planting, pruning, and sharing knowledge. Some come with years of experience, others just a willingness to help. All are welcome. That's part of what makes this place feel like Bastrop County.

In this way, the garden continues to be maintained by Bastrop

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County Master Gardeners as a demonstration and education space—supporting our mission of outreach, teaching, and community engagement. It serves not only as habitat, but as a living classroom where visitors can see practical, sustainable gardening techniques—especially the use of native plants—in action.

Beyond the regular workdays, the garden also serves as a hub for education and outreach. With educational classes on hands-on pruning sessions to pollinator-focused events, it's a place where folks of all ages can connect with gardening in a way that's practical and approachable.

And that's really the heart of it.

Cedar Creek Park isn't just a project—it's an example of what can happen when a community leans into its mission. It reflects what the Master Gardeners are all about: sharing knowledge, supporting each other, and helping our county grow—one garden at a time.

If you haven't been out yet, it's worth the visit. And if you have, you already know—there's always something new blooming out there, and something new to learn.

This is the second in our BCMGA Garden Spotlight Series highlighting the demonstration and education gardens supported by Bastrop County Master Gardeners.

USDA Cold Hardiness Map Update: Time to Go 'Tropical'?

By Howard Nemerov

Two years ago, I published analysis of the USDA's new cold hardiness map, where they moved Bastrop to a warmer winter climate zone (from 8b to 9a).[1] But cold hardiness maps are backward-looking, in this case based upon three decades of temperature data ending in 2020.

The following three winters showed colder winter lows, suggesting we're still in Zone 8b with normal lows down to 15°, and I recommended you continue landscaping with plants already known to be cold hardy here. *(Continued on page 5)*

New Website Features

Check out our website, which features project slideshows, a new photo gallery section, and an events calendar to check out upcoming activities. Find news articles and our newsletters. Thanks to Curtney Dyer for keeping the info timely for us. https://txmg.org/bastropcounty/

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This update includes three more years of winter temperature data that reinforces earlier findings: Bastrop winters may have warmer before 2020, but it's still best to landscape with plants hardy to Zone 8b, or 8a for insurance.

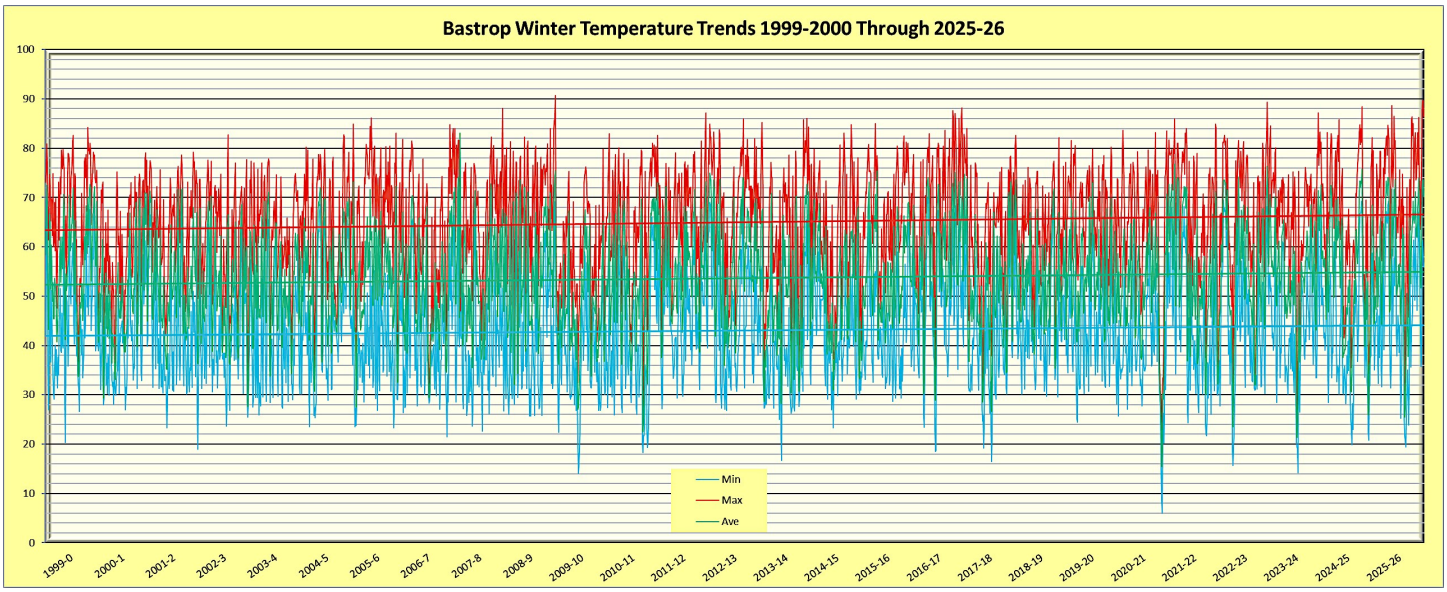
Cold hardiness zone: a practical definition

According to The Royal Horticultural Society, "Hardiness ratings are determined by the lowest temperature a plant is likely to withstand."[2] This key point is worth remembering as we explore LCRA temperature data below: ***What's the lowest temperature your plants can survive?***

Most perennials have cold hardiness zone ratings: If you landscape for the right zone, those plants should return reliably each spring. Plants considered "tropical" usually cannot survive our winters, and some begin showing damage at temperatures below 50°F. "In-between" plants like many citrus fruit trees can survive in South Texas but need protection to survive our winter weather.

This article is not a commentary on climate change

First, a caveat: This article is not an opinion on climate change. For example, the 27-year historic trend recorded by the Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA) Bastrop station show an upward trend in overall winter low temperatures (+5.2%), highs (+5.1%), and average (+5.0%) as shown below. Other LCRA stations show similar trends across Bastrop County. At the same time, notice the lowest lows in the last six winters. It appears that Bastrop winters can average warmer overall while extreme lows get colder. That's why this article addresses one question only: **Should you change permanent landscaping to include less cold-hardy plants?**



Similar results are true for five LCRA weather stations across Bastrop County (listed below).

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Difference between local weather data and large-scale modeling

USDA cold hardiness maps are retrospective, meaning they look back at temperatures over a certain period—usually 30 years—using available weather station data. Then they interpolate temperatures of areas between weather stations using a complex model that includes elevation changes.[3] This model is called PRISM, which stands for "Parameter-elevation Regressions on Independent Slopes Model." [4]

> *The original algorithm was written to mimic the decisions an expert climatologist makes while developing a map showing long-term averages of temperature and precipitation.*[5]

The PRISM dataset includes weather stations across the U.S., while the dataset used in this article covers Bastrop County and a few surrounding LCRA weather stations located on or near the Colorado River. This underscores the need to focus on how local data informs Bastrop County gardeners on what plants to grow.

The USDA defines certain criteria followed in this article, addressing extreme low temperature data which is vital to remember when planning your landscape:

> *The 2023 map is based on **30-year averages of the lowest annual winter temperatures** at specific locations, is divided into 10-degree Fahrenheit zones and further divided into 5-degree Fahrenheit half-zones.*[6] *[emphasis added]*

LCRA Data cited in this article

I'm tracking five Bastrop County LCRA stations:

- Colorado River at Bastrop
- Cedar Creek 3 WSW
- Big Sandy Creek near Elgin
- Rosanky 1W
- Colorado River at Smithville.

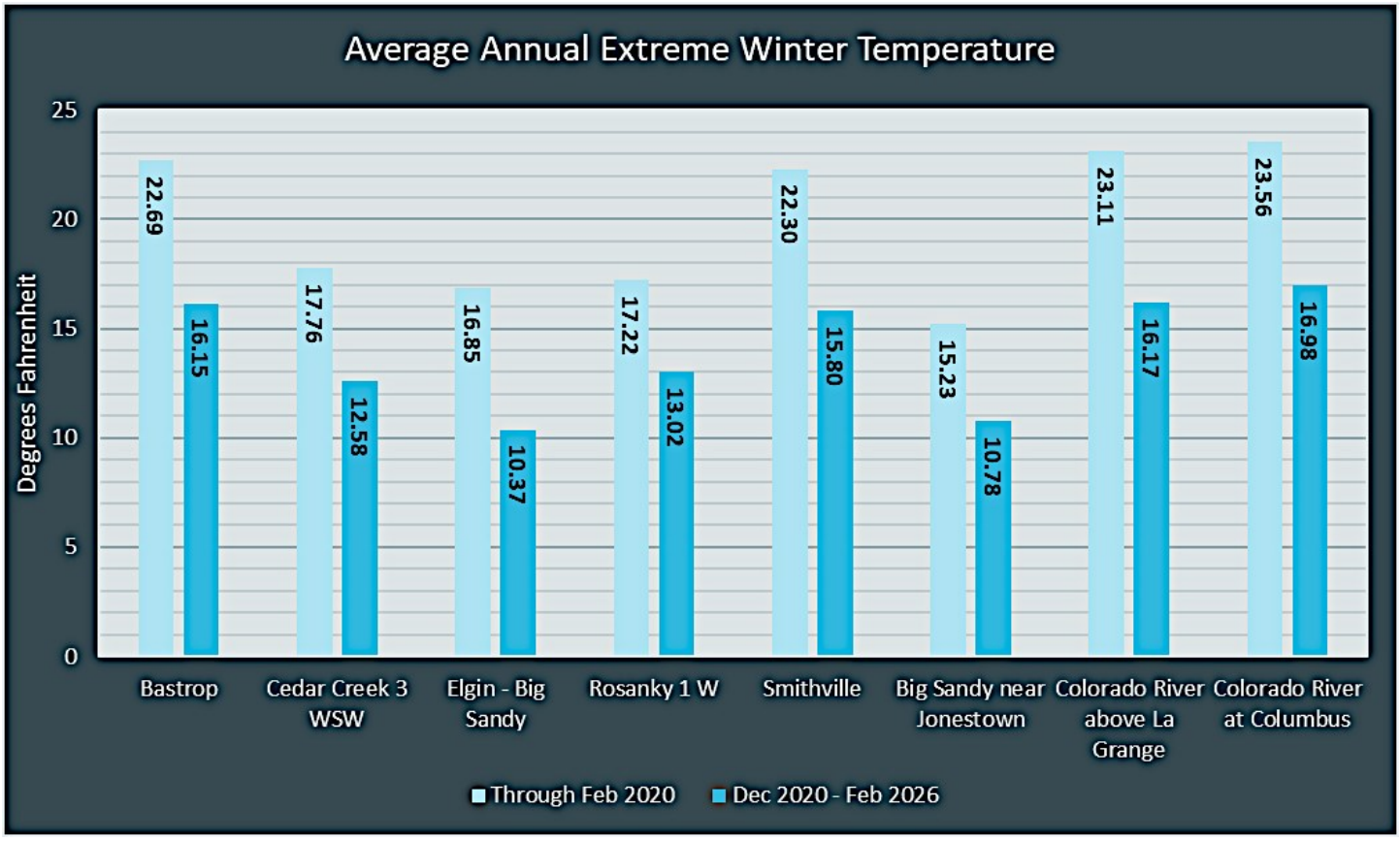
I also included one station in neighboring Travis County (Big Sandy Creek near Jonestown) and Fayette County (Colorado River above La Grange). All these stations reside in areas that used to be in USDA Zone 8b and have officially moved to Zone 9a. To check for larger trends, I included one LCRA station in Colorado County (Colorado River at Columbus) which the USDA also moved from Zone 8b to 9a.[7]

What the data shows

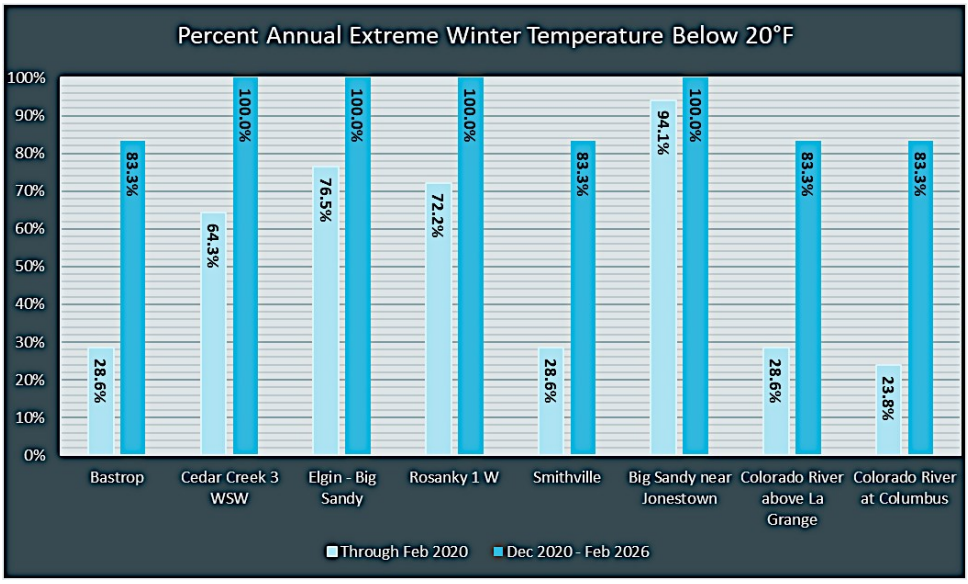
Since this discussion is about planting to survive coldest temperatures, the following graph shows the coldest winter temperatures reported by the LCRA. Through February 2020, extreme lows were warmer; from December 2020 through February 2026, every LCRA station recorded lower temperatures.

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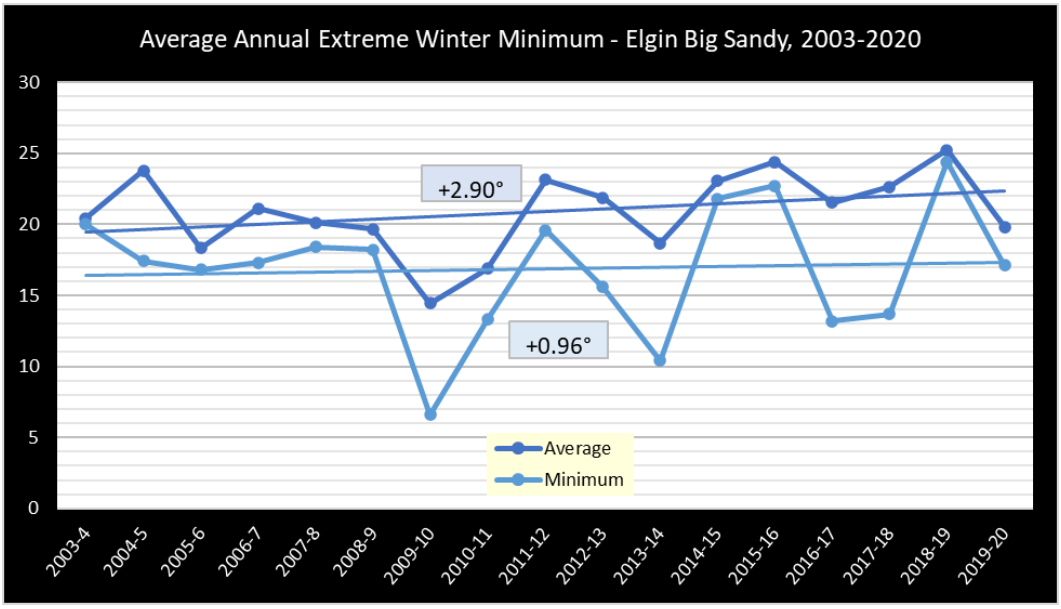


In case you're wondering if the February 2021 freeze was the only reason why the extreme winter temperature average dropped since 2020, the next graph shows the percentage of extreme lows below 20°, which is the cut-off between USDA Cold Hardiness Zones 9a (lowest winter temperature 20°) and 8b (lowest winter temperature 15°). Reflecting the graph above, the percent of extreme lows below 20° increased for all stations. Half experienced lows below 20° every winter since 2020; the other half went from around 25% to 83%, or 5 of 6 winters since December 2020. These data show that extreme winter lows have declined since the USDA updated their cold hardiness map.

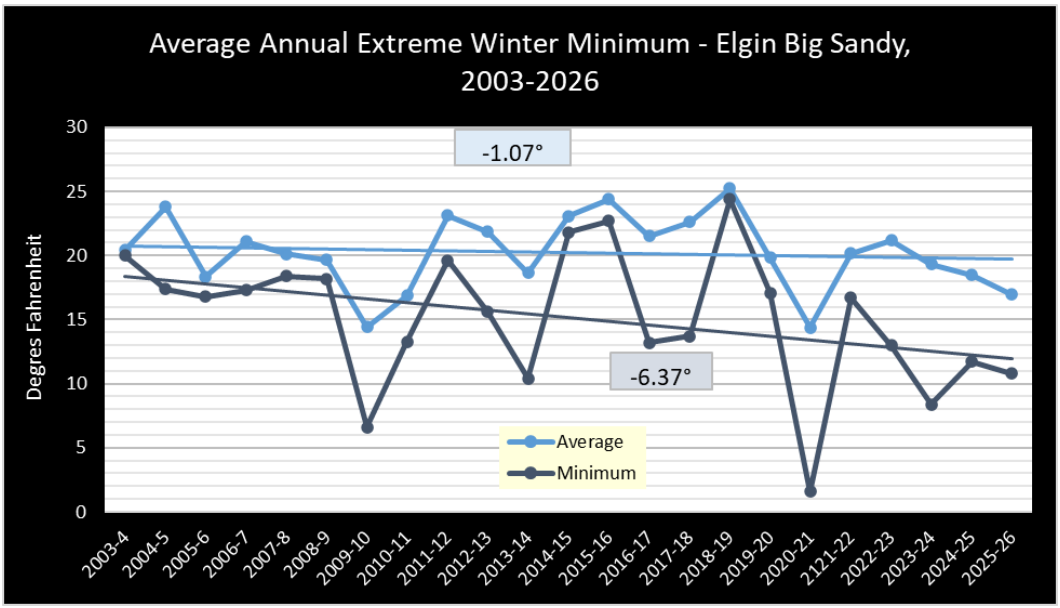


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Each year, the coldest temperature of the year has been in December, January, or February. Collating the coldest night for each month creates the average extreme temperature for each winter. As an example, the graph at right shows extreme cold trends for the Big Sandy at Elgin LCRA station through winter of 2020. During that time, Elgin's average extreme low temperatures increased 2.90°, supporting the USDA's claim that winters had warmed enough to move Elgin into a warmer cold hardiness zone. Even each winter's extreme minimum (coldest night each winter) trended warmer (+0.96°).



However, the graph at the left shows the last six winters have reversed Elgin's average minimum temperature trend (-1.07°), while extreme lows trended lower (-6.37°). Extreme cold temperatures over the last six winters impacted these trends. Remember, the new USDA cold hardiness map represents what happened between 1991 and 2020, not what's happened since.

Similar trends occurred throughout Bastrop County and neighboring counties: warmer extreme winter lows through 2020, trending colder afterwards. The table below compares December through February average monthly lows plus the extreme low for each winter. All LCRA stations but one showed that the average extreme lows increased through 2020, supporting the USDA's moving these locations into Zone 9a based on temperature data through 2020. Adding the six winters through 2026 shows

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that average extreme lows declined or increased less, and extreme winter lows decreased across all LCRA stations. (Increasing trends shaded red; decreases shaded blue.)

Of course, this LCRA data has become retrospective just like the USDA data, but it's the latest and most accurate data we have today. ***Don't plant coconut palms just yet!***

Extreme Winter Low Temperature Trends by LCRA Station				
Station	*Through 2020*		*Through 2026*	
	Average	Lowest	Average	Lowest
Colorado River at Bastrop	+1.01	+0.43	-1.37	-5.80
Cedar Creek 3 WSW	+4.30	+3.01	-0.83	-4.24
Elgin Big Sandy Creek	+2.90	+0.96	-1.07	-6.37
Rosanky 1W	+1.73	+0.74	+0.23	-4.25
Colorado River at Smithville	+0.15	-0.92	-2.03	-6.71
Big Sandy Near Jonestown	+2.91	+0.90	+0.57	-3.67
Colorado River Above La Grange	-0.74	-1.67	-3.95	-7.92
Colorado River at Columbus	+0.59	-1.01	-1.44	-7.02

Conclusion

The vital consideration as a gardener—the question you need to answer—is: "Is it reasonable to change plant selection criteria to include less cold-hardy plants?" Recent LCRA temperature data says the answer is, "Not for Bastrop County."

Endnotes

[1] Nemerov, Howard. "What the New USDA Cold Hardiness Map Means for Your Garden." *What's Growing On?* July 2024. https://txmg.org/bastropcounty/files/2024/07/07-Jul.pdf
[2] "RHS hardiness rating." Royal Horticultural Society. Accessed May 22, 2024. https://www.rhs.org.uk/advice/rhs-hardiness-rating
[3] Daly, Christopher et al. "Physiographically sensitive mapping of climatological temperature and precipitation across the conterminous United States." *International Journal of Climatology*, 2008. Accessed November 16, 2023. https://www.prism.oregonstate.edu/documents/pubs/2008intjclim_physiographicMapping_daly.pdf
[4] "FAQ." PRISM Climate Group. Accessed November 16, 2023. https://www.prism.oregonstate.edu/FAQ/
[5] "PRISM High-Resolution Spatial Climate Data for the United States: Max/min temp, dewpoint, precipitation." National Center for Atmospheric Research, University Corporation for Atmospheric Research. Accessed November 16, 2023. https://climatedataguide.ucar.edu/climate-data/prism-high-resolution-spatial-climate-data-united-states-maxmin-temp-dewpoint
[6] "USDA Unveils Updated Plant Hardiness Zone Map." Agricultural Research Service, USDA. Accessed November 16, 2023. https://www.ars.usda.gov/news-events/news/research-news/2023/usda-unveils-updated-plant-hardiness-zone-map/
[7] "Temperature – Current." Lower Colorado River Authority. https://hydromet.lcra.org/

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