What's Growing On?

BASTROP COUNTY MASTER GARDENER ASSOCIATION

August 2026



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There's a Place for You in BCMGA

Reflections from Dale Weiss, BCMGA President



As we head into a busy fall, there are a lot of opportunities to get involved with BCMGA.

We have two of our major events coming up: the Water Conservation Symposium on September 26 and our Fall Plant Sale on October 3. Both take a lot of work, and both are successful because our members are willing to step up and help. Whether you can give a few hours or take on a larger role, we need you.

We are also beginning the process of nominating our officers for 2027. This is important to the future of our association. If you have ever thought about serving in a leadership position, or know someone who would be a good fit, now is the time to consider it. You don't have to know everything before you volunteer. None of us did when we started. What matters is being willing to serve, listen, learn, and help move BCMGA forward.

I especially want to encourage our 2026 interns to get involved. Don't feel like you need to wait until you graduate to become part of the association. Come to our meetings. Volunteer at the Symposium or Plant Sale. Visit one of our projects. Get to know the members and find an area that interests you. This is your association too, and getting involved is one of the best ways to learn what being a Master Gardener is all about.

BCMGA has a lot going on - education, community projects, plant sales, Ask a Master Gardener events and much more. None of it happens because of one person or one committee. It happens because people are willing to participate.

There really is a place for everyone in BCMGA. I hope you'll find yours and get involved.

TEXAS MASTER GARDENER
TEXAS A&M AGRILIFE EXTENSION
Bastrop County

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.

Growing Forward Together

By Tish Holt, BCMGA President-Elect



I am truly honored—and more than a little excited—to have been elected President-Elect of the Bastrop County Master Gardeners Association!

One of the things I value most about this organization is that, much like a thriving garden, it grows because many people contribute their time, knowledge, energy, and care. Every class taught, question answered, demonstration garden tended, event supported, and conversation with a neighbor helps strengthen our community and advance the Master Gardener mission.

As I prepare to step into this new leadership role, I'm grateful for the opportunity to learn from those who have served before me and to work alongside such a talented and generous group of volunteers. Our certified Master Gardeners bring an incredible depth of knowledge and experience, our alumni remain an important part of the roots and history of our organization, and our current interns bring fresh enthusiasm, curiosity, and new ideas. Together, that makes for a pretty remarkable garden!

I'm looking forward to a year filled with opportunities to learn, serve, connect, and—of course—grow. I hope we can continue building on the programs and traditions that make our association strong while also welcoming new ideas and finding new ways to share research-based horticultural information throughout Bastrop County.

Gardening has a wonderful way of reminding us that worthwhile things take patience, teamwork, and a willingness to keep learning. Sometimes we plant something and enjoy the results almost immediately. Other times, we may not see the full impact of our efforts for years. The same is true of the work we do as Master Gardeners. Every person we teach, every young gardener we encourage, and every bit of reliable information we share plants a seed.

Thank you for the confidence you have placed in me by electing me President-Elect. I'm looking forward to serving, getting to know even more of you, hearing your ideas, and working together to help the Bastrop County Master Gardeners Association continue to flourish.

Here's to healthy gardens, great friendships, new adventures, and an exciting year ahead. Let's keep growing—together!

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Water Conservation Starts at Home

By Debbie Mikel



We hear a lot about water these days. How much we use, how we can conserve it, and what the future of this precious resource looks like. It can sometimes feel overwhelming. What can one person do to make a difference?

The answer may be closer to home than you think. Our landscapes are more than plants, lawns, and flowers that need to be watered. Every time it rains, or we turn on the irrigation, we make choices that affect what happens to that water. Does it soak into the soil and nourish our plants, or does it run off our property carrying soil, fertilizer, and other pollutants with it? What happens in our yard doesn't necessarily stay in our yard. The choices we make on our property can affect our neighbors, our creeks, our rivers, and everything downstream.

It all begins beneath our feet. Healthy soil is not just dirt. It is a living ecosystem filled with organisms that help our plants grow, hold water, and reduce runoff. When we build healthy soil, choose plants suited to our environment, water wisely, and find ways to capture and use rainwater, we can reduce the amount of water our landscapes need.

The good news is that you don’t have to completely redesign your yard to make a difference. Small changes, multiplied by hundreds of homeowners, can have a tremendous impact. Maybe it’s fixing a leaking sprinkler head. Maybe it’s adjusting your irrigation schedule, adding mulch, improving your soil, planting a native species, or finding a way to capture some of the rain that falls on your property. Every drop we keep in the landscape is a drop that doesn't have to be taken from somewhere else.

Come Learn What You Can Do

Join the **Bastrop County Master Gardeners** for our **Water Conservation Symposium** on **Saturday, September 26 at the Bastrop Community Center**. Experts will share practical ideas for efficient irrigation, rainwater harvesting, water-wise landscaping, healthy soil, and other simple changes you can make at home.

Whether you have a large yard, a small garden, or are just getting started, you’ll leave with ideas you can put into practice right away. Let’s learn how the way we care for our

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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 Courtney Dyer for keeping the info timely for us.
https://txmg.org/bastropcounty/

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own little piece of the landscape can help protect water for our entire community—and for generations to come.

For more information and how to reserve your place to attend https://txmg.org/bastropcounty/water-conservation-symposium/.

Meet our speakers

Robert Mace, Ph.D.



Executive Director & Professor of Practice

Robert Mace is the Executive Director and Chief Water Policy Officer at the Meadows Center for Water and the Environment and a Professor of Practice in the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies at Texas State University.

Before joining Texas State University in 2017, Robert worked at the Texas Water Development Board for 18 years, ending his career there as the Deputy Executive Administrator for the Water Science & Conservation office. While at the Board, Robert worked on understanding groundwater and surface water resources in Texas, advancing water conservation and innovative water technologies such as desalination, aquifer storage, and recovery, reuse, and rainwater harvesting regional and state water planning, and protecting Texans from floods.

Jane Duke, Ph.D.



A citizen scientist and expert in soil regeneration

Jane Duke became involved in soil health while managing a horse farm and crop fields in North and West Texas. She holds an M.A. in Environmental Philosophy from the University of North Texas and a Ph.D. In Consumer Economics and Environmental Design from Texas Tech University. She is an active leader of the Elm Fork Chapter of Texas Master Naturalists and coordinates the NICE (Natives Improve and Conserve Environments) program for the Trinity Forks Native Plant Society of Texas. She is also active in Texas Organic Food & Growers and the Texas Beekeepers Association.

As a Soil Restoration Educator and Systems Scientist, she helps land stewards and organizations move beyond guesswork by understanding the biological engine of the soil. Her work is built on a unique “Triple Threat” of credentials that allow her to translate complex soil health data into actionable, ethical, and scientifically sound strategies.

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Ben Gilliland



Proprietor of Grizzly Falls Nursery and Landscaping

After retiring from the Army in 2003, Ben Gilliland started in landscaping business. In 2015, he bought the town's nursery which was going close its doors. With Ben at the helm, Grizzly Falls Nursery has grown and shifted to an emphasis on growing Texas natives. He still oversees his design/build/manage landscape firm as a part of the nursery.

Ben is passionate about water conservation and enjoys helping home-owners create a more water efficient garden that supports local wildlife and reduces the need for constant garden upkeep. This includes teaching clients how to test their irrigation systems, so they are not over or under watering their plants. Over the years he has been a guest on several social media accounts like the Contractor Grow Show and has been featured on the Central Texas Gardener television show.

Natalie McAnarney



aka The Plant Ninja – Texas Gardener @theplantninja-texasgardener

Natalie is a Master Gardener who helps others learn about gardening in Central Texas while balancing HOA rules and the dry Texas climate. She specializes in Native and well-adapted plants, including those that are pollinator friendly. She creates drought-tolerant design that balances beauty and function. She gives her followers real garden updates including her wins, mistakes, and everything in between. Her goal through her social media site is to help others create landscapes that look good, handle the Texas heat, and support the ecosystem.

Build Soil Faster by Being Lazy

By Howard Nemerov



Courtesy of Disney Corporation

Every gardener wants healthier soil with the least expense and hassle. This article provides background on what's needed to build healthier soil and then discusses how you can accomplish that with one simple, lazy practice.

Organic matter builds better soil

Experts agree organic matter creates the perfect

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soil. Most gardeners miss one vital opportunity to enhance soil organic matter: Just be too lazy to pull up last year's crops and flowers. To understand this, first let's review what organic matter is and how it benefits your soil.

People toss around the term "organic matter" but what does that mean? Even the Royal Horticultural Society states:

> *Organic matter is a much used term that can refer to several things, and is easily confused with similarly named activities such as organic gardening. It is no surprise that gardeners are often confused by this very useful piece of horticultural shorthand.*[1]

They go on to provide a simple definition: 'Organic' means derived from living matter, but in chemistry means carbon-containing compounds that are usually but not always derived from living things." Today we'll focus on the first six-word clause, because you don't need a chemistry degree to have high-organic soils: Getting that degree is the opposite of lazy.

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension notes: "most Texas soils contain 1% or less organic matter."[2]

According to Texas A&M AgriLife Extension, adding organic matter is close to a cure-all for any garden's soil problems. Organic matter:

- Loosens clay soil so plant roots can develop fully.
- Helps sandy soils hold more water, so irrigation doesn't become runoff and you spend less money maintaining your garden.
- Makes it easier to work when planting.
- Places nutrients where plant roots can access them.[3]

When most people think about adding organic matter to their soil, they're thinking composting, but that takes a lot of work and writing about it makes me want to take a nap. You must gather your compost materials, combine them just right, keep them moist but not too wet, and turn it regularly to produce a batch of finished compost. That's a lot of work!

You can buy compost, but that's expensive and requires extra work to pay for it.

In either case, you must mix that compost into the soil to derive the four benefits mentioned above. This means working it in with a garden fork if you're younger, or using a tiller if attaining your lazier years. But tilling compromises your soil and makes you dependent on tilling to keep fixing the problems created by tilling. To understand this, you need to understand the importance of the soil food web, the microbes that support this web, and why being lazy helps you take care of your soil so it takes care of your plants.

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service published a free, online primer on the soil food web, an "integral part of landscape processes."

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> *An incredible diversity of organisms make up the soil food web. They range in size from the tiniest one-celled bacteria, algae, fungi, and protozoa, to the more complex nematodes and micro-arthropods, to the visible earthworms, insects, small vertebrates, and plants.*[4]

Tilling disrupts the soil food web, killing worms, insects, and driving microbes that work best near the soil surface deeper underground, while killing microbes that work best deeper in the soil by exposing them to air and sunlight. Tilling disrupts natural decomposition processes that have been fertilizing forests and prairies for eons. Nature has found a way to fertilize vast tracts of land by being lazy. Unless one believes there's an army of garden gnomes venturing into forests at night with lilliputian rototillers…rather tiring to imagine.



Courtesy of pngtree.com

The lazy secret to better soil

The one simple secret to building soil organic matter the lazy way: ***Stop pulling up plants!*** That's it.

As discussed above, organic matter is what plants are made of, and organic matter ***in*** the soil is where all the benefits happen.

Roots are organic matter already in the soil. You just spent a season planting vegetables and flowers, tending them so they feed you and produce beautiful flowers that attract pollinators, which sounds like a lot of work. Meanwhile, each plant has been busy converting sunlight into energy that gets stored in roots. This same energy enabled plants to produce large, healthy root systems that have created a zone of higher organic matter in surrounding soil.

Why pull plants up after they've served their purpose? Then what? Do you toss them in the garbage to fill a landfill? Do you cart them to the compost area to recycle them? That's more work than necessary.

Chop and Drop to the rescue

If you chop plant tops and let them lie where they fall, you instantly create mulch that:

- Protects soil from sun damage.
- Reduces erosion.
- Keeps soil moister to reduce irrigation.
- Feeds microbes that produce more bio-available organic matter and nutrients for next season's plants.

Feed the microbes, which feed the soil, which feed your plants.

Cut stems off near the soil line and let microbes begin decomposing roots where they

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are: in the soil. This releases nutrients exactly where the next season's plants need them, and adding organic matter to produce the benefits discussed above. Decomposing roots also create galleries where earthworms and arthropods can more easily burrow through the soil. Let nature's rototillers do the work.

Many authors have written about chop and drop gardening. There's even a book about it, but that means working to pay for it. There are online resources like university extension services[5] and the Royal Horticultural Society.[6] There are some caveats to this practice. For instance, just like you avoid composting diseased plants, pull them—including roots—and remove to the garbage. I recommend reading the two links mentioned above and perhaps do some more internet searching. As with any garden practice, combining scientific reasoning and artful application results in the least effort and best results in the long run.

Here's to your healthiest garden yet! (Along with more nap time.)

Endnotes

[1] The RHS Advice Team. "Organic matter: what is it?" Royal Horticultural Society. Accessed August 11, 2026. https://www.rhs.org.uk/soil-composts-mulches/what-is-organic-matter
[2] "Organic Crop Production Requirements." Texas A&M AgriLife Extension. Accessed August 11, 2026. https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/vegetable/guides/organic-vegetable-production-guide/organic-crop-production-requirements/
[3] Joseph Masabni. "Soil Preparation." Texas A&M AgriLife Extension. Accessed August 11, 2026. https://agrilifeextension.tamu.edu/library/gardening/soil-preparation/
[4] Ingham, Elaine R. "Soil Biology and the Landscape." USDA Natural Resources Council. Accessed February 6, 2021. https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/soils/health/biology/?cid=nrcs142p2_053868
[5] Lauren Spaduzzi. "Chop and Drop Gardening: Turning Plant Waste into Healthy Soil." University of Florida Extension. Accessed August 11, 2026. https://blogs.ifas.ufl.edu/hillsboroughco/2026/05/29/chop-and-drop-gardening-turning-plant-waste-into-healthy-soil/
[6] Olivia Drake. "Chop and drop: all you need to know." Royal Horticultural Society, November 12, 2024. Accessed August 11, 2026. https://www.rhs.org.uk/garden-inspiration/seasonal/chop-and-drop

Calendula in the Winter Garden

By Howard Nemerov





I prefer growing natives, and I also want to provide nectar through the winter. *Calendula officinalis 'Orange Flash'* has provided the latter when nothing else is blooming (Orange Sulfur butterfly, right). Attracting hover flies (*Allograpta obliqua*, left) provides natural control of early spring aphids. Starts will be offered at our fall sale.