

Caring for Texas Natives

by Ursula Nanna, Bell County Master Gardener

Dreaming of a low or no maintenance garden that takes care of itself? Well, me too. If you've chosen native Texas plants hardy to zone 8a, you're on your way. But even the hardiest perennials need some care now and then. Here are a few tips to help the plants perform at their best.

Prior to planting, site preparation is a most important chore. Be sure the site is well prepared and has good drainage. Add 3-4" of compost or organic matter to the bed and mix it with the existing soil. This will aid drainage and supply nutrients to the soil. Caliche (our typical soil) does not drain well and is like clay when wet and cement when dry. It binds the nutrients keeping them from the plants. Sandy soil drains very well but allows the nutrients to drain away with the water. Organic matter mixed in to either type of soil makes a great difference. Then, grade the bed so there is a high point in the center. This will also help improve drainage.

After choosing your plants, set them out in the pots until you have them arranged as you want them. Now, plant them as deeply as they were in the pots. This keeps the stems from rotting if planted too deeply or from falling over at the first wind if planted too shallow. Gently firm the soil around each plant so the roots have good contact with the soil and to get out any air pockets. If some of your plants are root-bound, gently loosen the roots with your fingers before you plant them to help the roots spread. Water in each plant thoroughly. Before adding mulch, try this. Lay newspaper, 8 to 12 pages thick, in the garden and around the plants. Do not come right up to the plants, leave a few inches so water can get to the plant roots. If you've chosen a breezy day to do this, work a small area at a time and wet the papers to keep them from blowing away. You have just added a biodegradable weed barrier that will deter weeds and Bermuda grass from emerging in the garden. The paper will eventually break down and add more organic matter to your soil.

Bermuda grass is one of the peskiest garden weeds we have; it goes where it wants without regard for the garden bed. Be sure to get out every little piece and root when preparing the garden. Edging that needs to be trenched in is a great barrier to keeping Bermuda grass outside the beds. But you must be vigilant, that Bermuda will grow over the top of the edging!! Keep it pulled out!! Now, add 3 to 4" of your favorite mulch. All you may have to do is pull a few weeds that burrow into the mulch.

Water only as needed. Do this by checking the garden soil with your fingers. If the top 2" are dry, it's time to water. It's always better to water deeply and infrequently than shallow and often. Shallow watering causes the plant roots to remain at the soil surface weakening the plant and making it susceptible to drought and disease.

Instead of fertilizing, top dress with organic matter or compost to a depth of 2". This is best done in the spring. Synthetic fertilizing of native Texas plants will make them tall and spindly with few or no flowers, or it could kill them all together. The object of the compost is to improve the soil encouraging beneficial microorganisms and worms to do their job and to add nutrients to the soil for the plants.

If you periodically pinch off the spent flowers (deadhead), this will encourage the plants to make new blooms instead of setting seed. Also, trimming the plants lightly will make the plants bushy and strong.

For most native Texas plants, winter protection is not needed. Many herbaceous plants will die to the ground to re-emerge in the spring. This is their way of protecting themselves. Any hard pruning should be done as late in the season as possible...February is good. Pruning too early encourages new shoots to emerge; they will freeze and stress the plants.

If you are gardening to attract wildlife, it may not be good to use pesticides. If you've chosen the right plants, very few pest problems will arise, and if they do, there are many beneficial insects that will flock in and help you out. If treatment is required, use the least toxic material and follow application instructions.