

Bell County Master Gardeners
Tip of the Week
By Candy Mullen
“The Facts of Flax”

What is Flax? I got very curious and started to research the flax plant. Since I am of Irish descent, I have several Irish linen pieces. Irish linen is the brand name given to linen produced in Ireland. Linen is cloth woven from, or yarn spun from the flax fibre. Since about the 1950s to 1960s the flax fibre for Irish Linen yarn has been, almost exclusively, imported from France, Belgium and the Netherlands. Flax fibers are amongst the oldest fiber crops in the world. The use of flax for the production of linen goes back at least to ancient Egyptian times.

The flax, also known as “linseed,” is an annual crop plant with blue flowers. Flax seed is the source of linseed oil, an edible oil, as a nutritional supplement, and as an ingredient in many wood-finishing products. This is one of the few flowers in the world capable of truly producing the blue colors. You know how hard it is to find a true blue plant for our gardens in Central Texas!

The popularity of the flax plant has been increasing in the past years due to health concerns and awareness that is spreading across the world. Known for its high content of omega-3 fatty acids as well as fibre, flax seeds in its various forms have become standard in the diets of those who are looking towards a healthier lifestyle. Past the seed, the fibre extracted from the ‘skin’ of the plant can be used to make clothing articles, beddings, ropes, and more! Quite the versatile plant!

Flax seed is an ancient grain that has been used in the diets of humans for thousands of years. Hippocrates, the father of medicine, used flax seed for the relief of intestinal discomfort in 650 BC. During the 8th century, King Charlemagne so revered the health benefits of flax that he passed laws and regulations encouraging his subjects to regularly consume flax. Now, modern day nutritionists and scientists are re-discovering the tremendous health benefits of flax.

The soils most suitable for flax, besides the alluvial kind, are deep loams, and those containing a large proportion of organic matter. Heavy clays are unsuitable, as are soils of a gravelly or dry sandy nature. If we want to cultivate it here, think of raised beds, and heavy composting! Farming flax requires few fertilizers or pesticides, so it is easy to grow. Within 8 weeks of sowing, the plant will reach 10–15 cm in height, and will grow several centimeters per day under its optimal growth conditions, reaching 70–80 cm within fifteen days. Reminds me of the story of “Jack and the Beanstalk!”

Flax is harvested for fiber production after approximately 100 days, or a month after the plant flowers and two weeks after the seed capsules form. The base of the plant will begin to turn yellow. If the plant is still green the seed will not be

useful, and the fiber will be underdeveloped. The fiber degrades once the plant is brown.

The leaves are glaucous green, slender lanceolate, 20–40 mm long and 3 mm broad. The flowers are pure pale blue, 15–25 mm diameter, with five petals; they can also be bright red. The fruit is a round, dry capsule 5–9 mm diameter, containing several glossy brown seeds shaped like an apple pip, 4–7 mm long. In addition to referring to the plant itself, the word "flax" may refer to the unspun fibers of the flax plant. Various parts of the plant have been used to make fabric, dye, paper, medicines, fishing nets, hair gels, and soap. It is also grown as an ornamental plant in gardens. The Inca also used this to create bowstring. I would like to try to grow it; how about you? Have any questions about gardening in Central Texas? Contact ask.bcmga@gmail.com