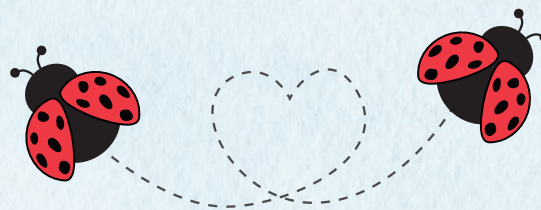


The Blooming Bell



Lovely Lady Beetles: Tiny Garden Guardians

By Dr. Laura Weiser Erlandson



As a child, you may remember excitedly catching a lady beetle (“ladybug”) while reciting the rhyme, “Ladybug, ladybug, fly away home....” But as gardeners, we don’t want them to fly away—we want them to stay! These beneficial predators help control pests, particularly aphids, making them valuable allies in the garden.



(Continued on page 10)

TEXAS

MASTER GARDENER

TEXAS A&M AGRILIFE EXTENSION

Bell County

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Monthly Meetings

WEDNESDAY SERVICE DAYS:

First & Third Wednesdays, 8:30-11:30 am, is a Master Gardener workday at the Extension Office. (2nd & 4th Wednesdays, prior to meetings).

General Membership Business Education Meeting:

Wednesday, March 12 Social time is 9:00- 9:30 a.m.

We will be hosting the business portion of the meeting on Google Meets for those who cannot make it in person (this will not include the educational portion of the meeting). Look for the online meeting link in the weekly events email and the VMS. We will meet in person at the Harris Community Center, 401 N. Alexander St., Belton.

Board of Directors Meeting:

Board of Directors meetings are held as a hybrid meeting. Look for the link in the VMS. All of our meetings will be held in the extension office and will begin promptly at 10:00 a.m.

Next Board Meeting: March 26

Herb Study Group

Evening Meeting: **Thursday, March 13th** at 6:00 p.m.
Morning Meeting: **Wednesday, March 19th** at 10:30 a.m.
Please contact Tracy Brown for further information

Killeen Municipal Court Community Garden Workdays

Every Saturday at 9:00 a.m.
3601 South W.S. Young Drive, behind the Civic and Conference Center
Contact Glenn Melton for details.

HELP DESK

Monday through Thursday, 9:00 am to Noon & 1:00 to 4:00 pm.

All photos contributed by Randy Brown, April Marek, Stephanie Preciado unless otherwise noted.



Texas AgriLife Extension Service
Horticulture Program in Bell County

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Executive Officers

President	Teri Marceau
1st Vice President	Stephanie Preciado
2nd Vice President	Barbara Ishikawa
Recording Secretary	Sophia Gomez
Treasurer	Chuck Lauer

Directors

Communications	April Marek
Facilities	Grounds Focus Group
Membership	Charlotte Nunnery
KMCCG	Glenn Melton
New Class	Dave Slaughter
Projects	Jan George
Youth	Jackie McLaughlin & Viola Ming-Copsy
Outreach	Outreach Committee



PRESIDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

BY TERI MARCEAU


Spring is in the air. I have seen daffodils and crocuses blooming. March is one of the busiest months around the Master Gardener Association. Just look at our calendar in VMS.

Are you ready for our annual fundraiser, a.k.a. The Plant Sale? We can expect to be busy on the 15th. If you haven't signed up in VMS yet, please do so. The plant sale committee is immersed in making signage for the sale day and could use help there as well. If you don't know how you can help before the sale day, just reach out to one of the board members, and we will point you in the right direction.

Just a few other activities on the calendar are the Pocket Prairie Workshop, the Herb Spiral Workshop, our monthly Outreach Seminar with MG Lenny West on container gardening, the Harker Heights Science & Outdoor Expo, LGEG, Herb Study Interest Group Meetings, the KMCCG, and the Help Desk. Let's not forget the General Membership Education meeting with Gil Eckrich on Hummingbirds and the Business Meeting. There is so much to get involved with.

This month, the board had its first of 2025's brainstorming meeting. Look for some exciting things to roll out from that.

The grounds committee had its first meeting of 2025. Just look around the extension grounds, and you can see their handiwork all around. The one major thing is that there is no more cattle panel fence around the demonstration gardens in the back. Floyd Ingram is quoted saying. "The demonstration gardens look fantastic without the fence."



President's Perspective (continued)

Since the fence is down, there has been some wildlife activity. I have a few suggestions. One is to protect your plants. I use the mesh trash cans from the Dollar Tree store; they cost \$1.25 and are easily removed and stored. Another suggestion is to protect each plant as it grows with a single cage. We stored the T-posts and cattle panels if you would like to make a fence around your individual bed.

Let me introduce you to the grounds committee. Jan George, Jan Upchurch, and Carol Morisset head up the rose bed in front. Jan George and Carol Morisset, with the help of Cynthia Beck, are your go-to for the Native Bed, a.k.a. as the handicap bed. Karen Colwick, Christy Reese *unofficially," and Carla Harmon are our irrigation team. Tracy Brown and the herb study group are heading up the herb spiral. Tracy Brown and I are the Pocket Prairie go-to. Charlotte Nunnery, Betty Nejtek, and Cynthia Beck are leading the way on the demonstration beds. If you would like to start a bed, please see one of them. And so many more helpers.

I find these groups of leaders to be invaluable to our organization. They have put in time and energy with the goal of meeting our mission statement while creating aesthetically pleasing gardens with minimal labor. Let us remember that we are all volunteers and respond to each other with positive comments rather than negative ones; they are better received. I ask that if you have something to say about this project, remember that there is more than one way to garden.

I thank each one of you for contributing your time, knowledge, and expertise to the Bell County Master Gardeners Association. Without you, we would not be able to serve our community with solid research-based horticultural information. You truly are a wonderful group of people.



Announcements

UPCOMING EVENTS



FREE Hands-On Workshop: How to Install a Pocket Prairie!

Join us on **Saturday, March 8**,
from **9 AM to 4 PM** at the
AgriLife Extension Office for a
free hands-on workshop
where you'll learn how to
design, plant, and maintain
your own Pocket Prairie.



What to Bring:

- Gloves
- Hat
- Water
- Gardening clothes to get dirty!



Bell County Master Gardeners Spring Plant Sale

March 15, 2025
8AM-12PM or until sold out

CADENCE BANK CENTER (EXPO CENTER)
301 W LOOP 121, BELTON, TX



Announcements

UPCOMING EVENTS

Container and Raised Bed Care and Maintenance

The Bell County Master Gardener Association is hosting a free monthly seminar "Container and Raised Bed Care and Maintenance" on Thursday, March 20th from 6:00PM to 7:30PM at the Texas Agrilife Extension Office, BCMGA Learning Center, 1605 N. Main St., Belton. Certified Master Gardener, Lenny West will discuss how best to grow and maintain container gardens and how they can help feed those in food deserts.

Please Register at
[bcmgaspeakers@](mailto:bcmgaspeakers@gmail.com)
[gmail.com](mailto:bcmgaspeakers@gmail.com)



Building an Herb Spiral


The Bell County Master Gardeners Association's Herb Study Group is hosting a hands-on workshop on March 22nd, 10 AM to 2 PM. If you want to create a productive, space-saving garden feature, join us for a hands-on workshop where we'll teach you how to build an Herb Spiral, a perfect solution for growing a variety of herbs in a small space!

What you Need: Gloves, hat, water, and an eagerness to get your hands in the soil.

What we will cover: Ground Prep and Design Tips; Building the Herb Spiral Structure; Installing irrigation for easy watering; Choosing and Planting Herbs.

Please Register at
[bcmgaspeakers@](mailto:bcmgaspeakers@gmail.com)
[gmail.com](mailto:bcmgaspeakers@gmail.com)





BCMGA

Plant Swap & Pot Luck

What's a plant swap? It is a great way to turn some of your "extra" plants into something new! It's also a great way to get to know what your fellow master gardeners have been growing. This event will be held on Wednesday, April 2, from 11:00am to 12:45pm in the Learning Center. How will it work? Bring one or more plants to swap or give away. For each plant you bring you will receive one ticket which can then be turned in for a plant from any other master gardener. Your plants may be grown from seed, dug up, divided or otherwise propagated. They must be planted in a container and labelled with common name and some level of care instructions. If your plant is known to spread aggressively, include that information on the label.

All plants are welcome! Perennials, native plants, herbs, vegetables, other annuals, succulents and houseplants would all be appreciated by your fellow gardeners.

If you have more than you need at home, consider bringing your extra plants to share with others. There is no requirement that you take additional plants home.

Since this event will take place over the lunch hour, we'd love to have some goodies to munch on. Salads and light snacks are always appreciated. Even if you don't have plants to swap, you are still invited to join in the pot luck lunch.

Final note – this is a "social" event open to Bell County Master Gardeners only. No service hours should be reported for preparing for or attending this event.

For more information, please contact barbaraishikawa@gmail.com



Project Updates

Herb Interest Study Group

Chamomile by Tracy Brown

Camomile (Chamomile) is a versatile herb and the 2025 Herb of the Year: It is valued for its calming and medicinal qualities. It has a wide range of uses, from health benefits to garden aid. However, it should be used cautiously, especially for people with allergies, those on medication, or those preparing for surgery. Always consult a healthcare professional before using camomile as a treatment, particularly if you have underlying conditions or concerns.

General Overview:

- Common name: Camomile (or Chamomile), often found along roadsides and considered a weed.
- Symbolism: Sometimes referred to as “the flower of Russia.”
- Most common use: Camomile tea, known for its calming properties and used to reduce anxiety and aid with sleep.

Plant & Gardening Benefits:

- Fungus prevention: An infusion made from camomile flowers (2 cups boiling water over 1 cup flowers) can help prevent fungal infections on plants. Sulfur compounds in camomile are thought to kill the fungus.
- Insect repellent: Planted near other crops, it helps repel insects and aids in the health of neighboring plants. It can also release beneficial scents for the garden.
- Natural herbicide: Camomile can act as a pre-emergent for weeds, preventing them from growing.



Herb Interest Study Group

Chamomile by Tracy Brown

Historical and Traditional Uses:

- Ancient Egypt: Used in cosmetics for its soothing properties.
- Spanish use: As a flavoring in wine, sherry, and beer, and as a bittering agent in traditional remedies.
- Polish variety: Known for its high essential oil content.
- English chamomile: Often used for ground cover or along pathways, as it doesn't flower as much.

Health and Medicinal Uses:

- Calming & Anxiety Relief: Commonly consumed as tea to help with sleep, relaxation, and anxiety.
- Mouthwash & Oral Care: Chamomile can be used for soothing the mouth, especially for those undergoing chemotherapy.
- Endometriosis Relief: Oil extract may provide relief for endometriosis symptoms.
- Insomnia & Anxiety: Mediterranean chamomile is known for its effectiveness in treating both insomnia and anxiety.

Precautions and Side Effects:

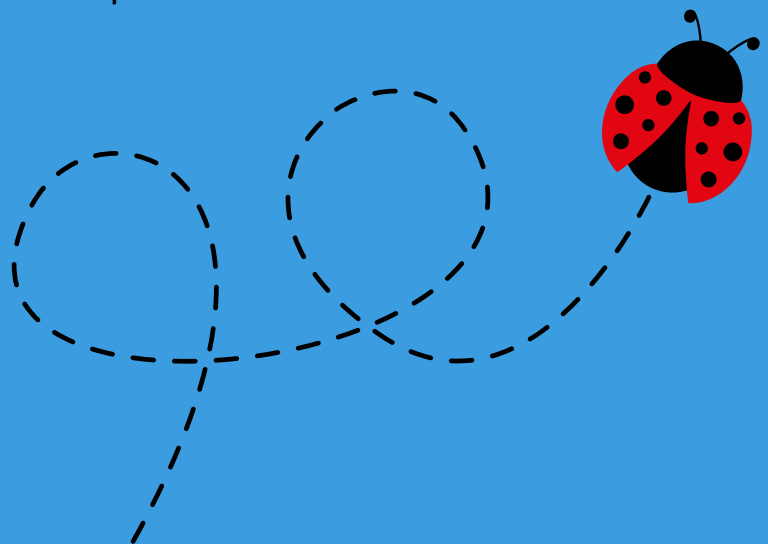
- Thujone: Chamomile contains thujone, which can be harmful in large amounts, so it's advised to limit tea consumption to 1 cup.
- Allergy Risks: People with ragweed allergies may have a reaction to chamomile.
- Interactions with Medications:
 - Can decrease the effectiveness of birth control pills.
 - Should not be taken with blood thinners, as it may cause adverse reactions.
- It is recommended to stop consuming chamomile at least 2 weeks before surgery due to potential blood-thinning effects.
- Asthma: It may exacerbate asthma symptoms.
- Skin & Eye Irritation: Overuse can lead to skin rashes or eye irritation.

Lovely Lady Beetles: Tiny Garden Guardians



Lady beetles belong to the family Coccinellidae and are typically round or dome-shaped with bright red, orange, or yellow coloration marked with black. These vivid colors warn predators that lady beetles are toxic if eaten. In Central Texas, both native and introduced species can be found. Since the late 1800s—when entomologist C.V. Riley used them to save the California citrus industry—lady beetles have been imported into the U.S. for biological pest control.

However, not all lady beetles are beneficial, so learning to identify them is key. Fortunately, they are relatively easy to distinguish. Here are some of the most common beneficial species in Central Texas:



Common Central Texas Beneficial Lady Beetles



Convergent Lady Beetle (*Hippodamia convergens*) – A native species, oval and orange with small black spots. Identified by two white lines converging on its thorax. Frequently used for aphid control.



Photo Credit Laura Weiser Erlandson



Photo Credit Laura Weiser Erlandson

Seven-Spotted Lady Beetle (*Coccinella septempunctata*) – An introduced species, round and dome-shaped with three black spots on each outer wing and one in the center (seven total). It preys on aphids and some caterpillars but has displaced a few native lady beetle species.

Pink-Spotted Lady Beetle (*Coleomegilla maculata*) – A native, elongated and pink to red with four black spots on each wing and two in the middle. “C mac” is a voracious aphid predator.



Asian Lady Beetle (*Harmonia axyridis*) – Introduced from Asia, highly variable in color and spots, but most commonly orange-red with or without markings. It feeds on aphids, thrips, mites, and insect eggs. Often mistaken for a pest due to its tendency to invade homes in cold weather.

Twice-Stubbed Lady Beetle (*Chilocorus stigma*) – A native, round and domed, entirely black with two red spots (“stabbed”). Common near oak trees, it primarily preys on scale insects.



Photo Credit Tiffany Wheless-Armstrong



Orange and Blood Red Lady Beetles (*Cycloneda munda* and *Cycloneda sanguinea*) – Native, spotless, round, and domed, with a white “C” pattern on their thorax. Often used for aphid control.

Ashy Gray Lady Beetle (*Olla v-nigrum*) – Native, gray or tan with black spots. Its thorax features a black “V” and four spots, making it easily recognizable. It feeds on psyllids and aphids.



Next time you’re in your garden, watch for these fabulous friends! You may also spot their larvae, which consume even more pests than adults. Typically, larvae are elongated, black with orange/yellow/red markings, alligator-like, and have six prominent legs. Unlike adults, they lack wings, so they stay put and feast on garden pests.

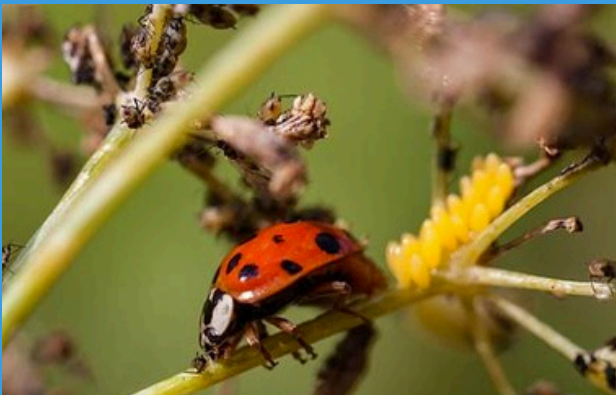


Photo Credit April Marek

To attract and keep lady beetles in your garden, provide floral nectar sources and avoid broad-spectrum pesticides. They will come for the nectar and, hopefully, lay eggs on your plants—tiny yellow clusters you may find on leaves. You can also purchase lady beetles from retailers, but buying eggs or larvae will maximize their impact in your garden.

Welcome these spotted garden guardians, and they’ll return the favor by keeping your plants pest-free!

Selected References

Bugguide.net

Sorenson, W.C., et al. 2018. Charles Valentine Riley: Founder of Modern Entomology. University of Alabama Press. Tuscaloosa, AL.

Texasento.net

Texasinsects.tamu.edu/lady-beetle-bug/





FEBRUARY 2025
BELL COUNTY

HELP DESK HIGHLIGHTS

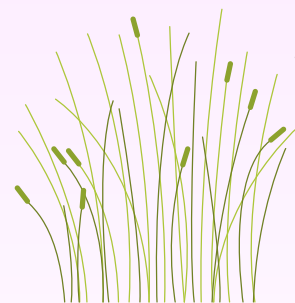
As we transition into early spring, gardeners across Bell County are preparing for planting season while addressing concerns about tree health, weed control, and soil preparation. February's Help Desk inquiries focused on fruit tree diseases, landscape plant selection, and best practices for maintaining lawns and gardens. Here's a summary of the most relevant issues and expert recommendations provided this month.

TREE HEALTH & DISEASE CONCERNS



Several residents brought in diseased fruit tree samples for identification and treatment options. Our team examined the samples and provided guidance on potential causes, emphasizing proper pruning, soil health, and disease prevention. Additionally, a resident concerned about oak wilt affecting trees in her pasture was advised on removal options and management practices to prevent further spread. Another gardener requested confirmation of oak wilt infection and general tree health assessments, which were referred to specialists for further evaluation.

LAWN & WEED MANAGEMENT

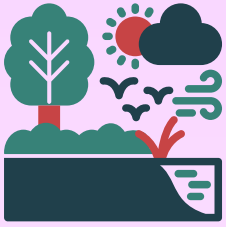


With spring around the corner, questions about weed control in St. Augustine grass and safe weed management in vegetable gardens were common. Homeowners were advised on selective herbicide options for lawns and organic weed control methods for vegetable gardens to avoid harming crops. A resident also inquired about soil amendments for raised beds, and we recommended incorporating compost and organic matter to improve soil structure and water retention.

VEGETABLE GARDENING & SEED SELECTION



As interest in home gardening grows, residents sought advice on starting vegetable gardens in raised beds and choosing the best seeds for the season. The Help Desk directed them to local resources, including the Extension Office's Seed Library, and provided guides on vegetable varieties for Central Texas. Additionally, a gardener struggling with weed overgrowth in a vegetable garden received recommendations for soil conditioning and weed suppression techniques.



LANDSCAPING & EROSION CONTROL

Several inquiries focused on choosing landscape plants for Central Texas, as well as strategies for controlling erosion on slopes. Residents were guided toward native plants suited for erosion control and introduced to terracing techniques for stabilizing hillsides. Additionally, those new to the area received resources on drought-tolerant plants, edible landscapes, and local gardening seminars to help them establish thriving gardens.



COMMUNITY OUTREACH & EDUCATIONAL EVENTS

February also saw an increase in requests for gardening education and outreach. The Help Desk coordinated with schools and local organizations, forwarding requests for Career Day participation at Cavazos Elementary and support for an April event at Morgan's Point. Additionally, interest in the Rainwater Harvesting Class was noted, and participants were connected with program organizers for future sessions.

With warmer weather on the horizon, now is the time to plan garden layouts, improve soil conditions, and manage weeds before peak growing season. Whether you're tending fruit trees, preparing a raised bed, or selecting the best seeds for your garden, the Bell County Master Gardener Help Desk is here to help. Reach out with your gardening questions, and happy planting!



Cream of Dandelion Soup

Kathy Lovelace

All parts of the dandelion are used in this light, creamy, flavorful soup.

Ingredients:

2 cups chopped dandelion leaves
1 cup dandelion flower petals, divided
1 cup dandelion buds
1 stalk celery, sliced
1 Tablespoon butter or oil
½ cup chopped onion
3 cloves garlic, minced
2 cups water or chicken stock
1 cup half-n-half or heavy cream
3 Tablespoons grated parmesan cheese
1 teaspoon each: salt, dried parsley,
dried basil
¼ teaspoon black pepper
½ teaspoon each: cumin, garlic powder
Chopped cooked chicken (optional)

Instructions:

Bring a pot of water to boil, add the dandelion leaves and boil until tender, 3-5 minutes. Drain and transfer to a bowl of ice water to stop cooking.

In a heavy-bottom soup pot, sauté onion, garlic and celery in butter or oil on medium heat, until tender. Add 2 cups of water or chicken stock.

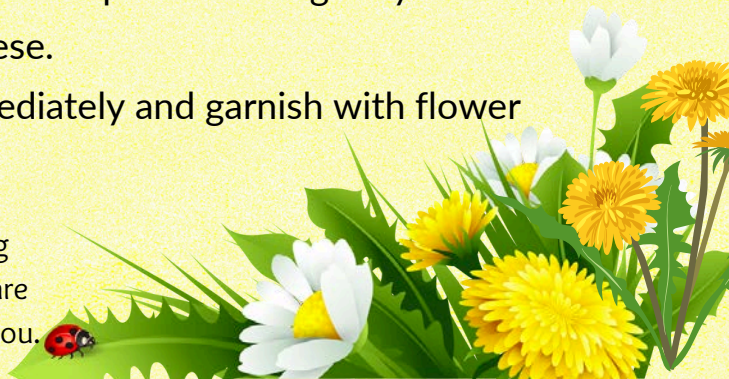
Reserve a couple of spoonfuls of the petals for garnishing, and put aside.

Add dandelion leaves, flower petals, buds, and spices to the pot. Simmer gently for around 45 minutes. Lower heat and stir in the cream and cheese.

Add chicken, if using. Simmer until heated. Serve immediately and garnish with flower petals.



Kathy Lovelace believed in using nature's gifts to create nourishing meals. This Cream of Dandelion Soup is one of her recipes, and we are grateful to Debbie Thompson for contributing it and sharing it with you.



Dianthus, A Long Time Favorite

By Pat Johnson

What about Dianthus? You may know it by the name of Pinks or Sweet Williams. Dianthus is actually a member of the carnation family, and it quickly reminds us of a petite, delicate carnation. It has a spicy fragrance with hints of clove and cinnamon.



Photo Credit Pat Johnson - This is a taller variety of dianthus available at a nursery or gardening source.

Depending on the variety, dianthus will grow up to 18 inches tall, but most of the varieties we find in local nurseries will grow about six inches tall and have a spread of about six to eight inches. This plant is a clumping plant. It grows into a small mound covered with pink, white, rose, lavender, red, or variegated blooms during its blooming season. This year, my dianthus plants were blooming all winter, even on the coldest days. Some were nipped a little during the freeze, but they will return to full bloom in spring.

Dianthus can be planted from seed. Germination takes anywhere from fourteen to thirty days. Many of us choose to purchase these plants that have a nice growing start from nurseries or other plant outlets. One can also divide existing clumps of dianthus and successfully plant the divided clump in another area of the landscape. Some varieties are self-sowing.



Plant dianthus in full sun or partial shade where they will receive at least 6 hours of sun in soil that is well-drained and alkaline. Keep mulch away from the base of dianthus to keep it from being too wet. It is suggested that they be watered only at the base of the plant to keep the foliage dry and prevent mildew. Water dianthus when dry. Fertilizing with a slow-release fertilizer will keep them happy for a long time. Other than that, Dianthus are a low-maintenance addition to your landscape.

Dianthus is a plant that has been adapted to many parts of the United States and has adapted nicely to Central Texas. It has graced gardens even in colonial times. Thomas Jefferson wrote about growing Sweet Williams in his gardening diaries.

According to a reliable source, it is native to the Alps in Europe.

The clove scent of dianthus repels deer, squirrels, and other critters. It is a great plant to attract pollinators to your gardens or landscape. Hummingbirds like it, too.



2025 Home & Garden Show

Submitted by Louann Hight

Here's to another successful BCMGA 2025 Home & Garden Show 'Ask the Master Gardener Booth'. Even though we were not able to hold seminars or sell succulents this year, our Booth was very busy answering questions ranging from how to get rid of Junipers to how to plant a spring garden. Special thanks go to the Master Gardeners that made the Booth so interesting to the Public: Wayne Schirner, Kathy Patterson, Don Wyatt, Ray Machovsky, Gary Slanga, Charles Newsome & Dennis Biggs.



Top Row L to R: Kathy Patterson, Louann Hight, Gary Slanga
Bottom Row L to R: Retired Master Gardeners Don Wyatt and Ray Machovsky



L to R: Master Gardener Interns Dr. Laura Weiser Erlandson, Tiffany Wheless-Armstrong, and Norma Kramer, along with Master Gardener Jackie McLaughlin



Reforestation Puerto Rico: A Visit to the Nursery at San Cristóbal Canyon

By Nina Keeler

Nestled at the entrance to the San Cristóbal Canyon trail in Barranquitas, Puerto Rico, lies one of the island's most vital ecological efforts—a reforestation nursery dedicated to restoring the island's once-thriving forests. Managed by Para la Naturaleza, this nursery is part of a larger reforestation initiative working to plant 100,000 trees annually and preserve 33% of Puerto Rico's lands by 2033. This mission is critical to protecting the island against environmental threats, from extreme weather to climate change.



A Legacy of Reforestation

Puerto Rico's forests have endured a dramatic history. At the start of the 20th century, agricultural expansion stripped the island of nearly all its forest cover, reducing it to just 6%. Thanks to reforestation efforts launched in the late 1980s, forests made a remarkable recovery, reaching 55% coverage. However, Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017 devastated this progress, destroying as many as 144 million trees.

In response, Para la Naturaleza expanded its reforestation efforts, creating a dedicated team to restore Puerto Rico's forests. The trees grown in the five nurseries across the island not only beautify the landscape but also regulate temperatures, prevent soil erosion, provide habitat for wildlife, and improve air and water quality.

The Reforestation Process: From Seed to Sapling

Visiting the Barranquitas nursery offers a firsthand look at the fascinating process of reforestation. Each tree starts its journey in the forest, where seeds are carefully gathered, cleaned, germinated, and nurtured into strong saplings before being planted in protected areas.

1. Foraging for Seeds

The first step begins in the forests surrounding the nursery, where trained staff and volunteers forage for seeds from native trees. The selection process is meticulous—only healthy, viable seeds are chosen to ensure a strong start.



2. Cleaning and Germination

Once collected, the seeds are cleaned to remove debris, excess pulp, or outer coatings that might prevent germination. Some seeds require special treatment, such as soaking in water or stratification (exposure to cold) to mimic natural conditions.



3. Potting the Seedlings

After the seeds germinate, they are transferred into small pots filled with nutrient-rich soil. This is where they begin to develop their root systems and first sets of leaves.



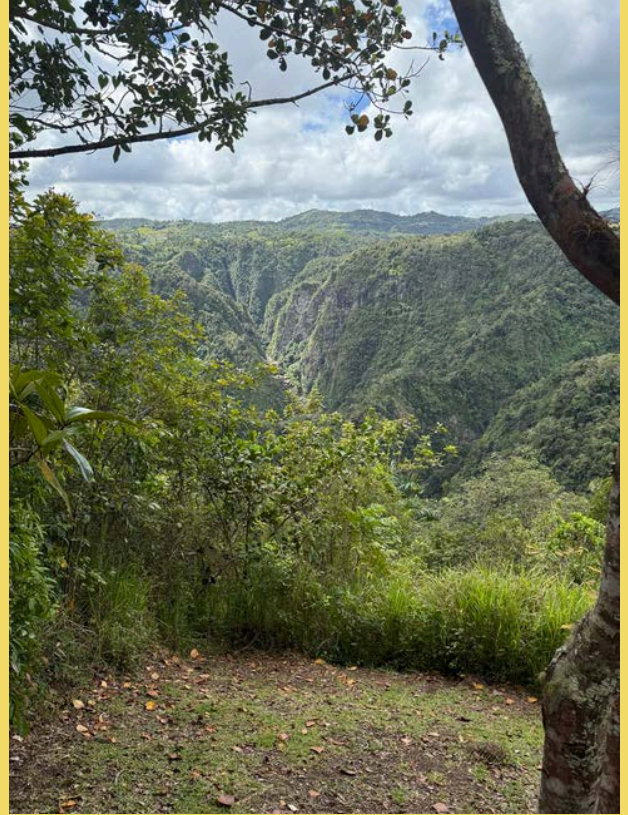
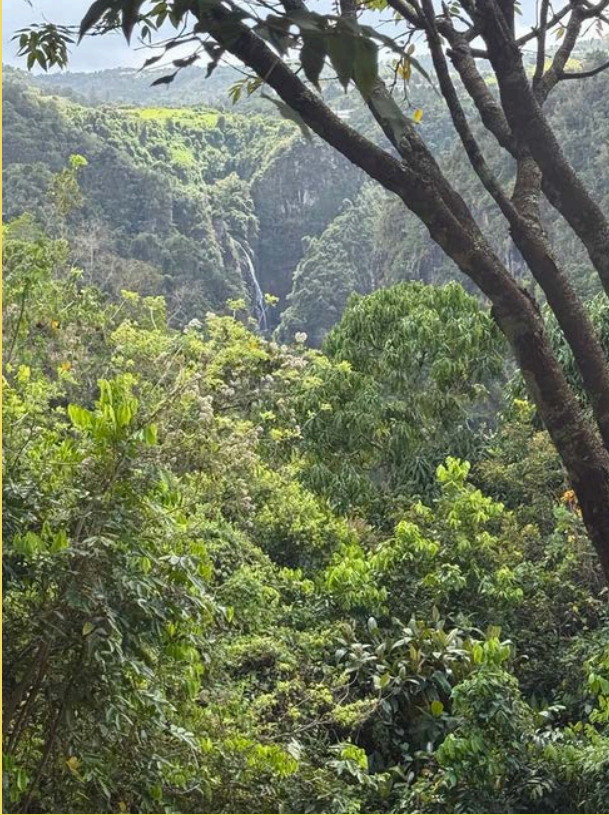
4. Up-Potting and Growth

As the young trees grow, they are transplanted into larger containers to give their roots more space to expand. This step is crucial for strengthening the saplings before they are ready for planting in the wild.



5. Reintroducing to the Landscape

Once mature enough, the trees are planted in reforestation sites, where they will contribute to rebuilding Puerto Rico's forests and providing critical environmental benefits for generations to come.



Join the Effort to Restore Puerto Rico's Forests

Reforestation Puerto Rico is about more than just planting trees—it is about reviving an ecosystem, protecting biodiversity, and safeguarding the future of the island. The work of Para la Naturaleza relies on the dedication of volunteers and supporters who share a commitment to ecological restoration. If you'd like to be part of this mission, consider visiting a nursery, volunteering, or making a donation to Para la Naturaleza. Every tree planted brings Puerto Rico one step closer to offsetting carbon emissions, preventing floods, and ensuring a healthier environment for future generations. To learn more or contribute to the cause, visit Para la Naturaleza's website and become part of Puerto Rico's reforestation movement.

