AgriLIFE EXTENSION
Texas A&M System

Brazoria County Master Gardener Association

WHAT'S GROWIN' ON

MARCH 2009

CONTENTS

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I have to say again THANK YOU to the many, many Brazoria Master Gardeners who contributed to making the **Citrus and Fruit Tree Sale** such a success! Please remember to send any comments you have on the sale to Carole Wenny. I'll send everyone an email soon with the time and date of the sale's critique meeting.

With such a warm and dry February, many of our plants are really confused. I'm seeing azaleas starting to bloom all over my neighborhood – it's too early for them. I was at the San Bernard National Wildlife Refuge recently and the Louisiana iris are starting to bloom. As I write this note, it's going to get into the mid-30's for 2 days – we may see the new growth on many plants get damaged.

This month will see the **ground breaking for the Enabling Garden Project**, a project that has been in the works for many months now. This is going to be a great addition to our Brazoria Environmental Education Station (BEES). It will hopefully bring in more visitors and get more people involved in gardening. Thanks to Jennifer Northrop for putting the grant together and leading the planning effort.

Finally, if you haven't seen our **BEES mascot**, you have to come to the head house and see it. It was created by Larry Lewis and it, like his other creations, is a unique work of art and a great addition to BEES. Thank you Larry.

COMING UP

⇒ **MG TRAINING Ongoing**
Every Thursday
03/05—03/19
9:00 am AgriLIFE Office
Volunteers Needed!
See Page 6

⇒ **MARCH GARDEN SERIES**
Sat, 03/07
9:00 am-12 noon at BEES
Veggies

⇒ **BCMGA MEETING**
Tues, 03/10/09
6:30 pm AgriLIFE Office

⇒ **PEACH/PEAR GRAFTING**
Sat, 3/14/09
9:00 am-12 noon at BEES

⇒ **MARCH GARDEN SERIES**
Sat, 03/21/09
9:00 am-12 noon at BEES
Grow Green

⇒ **MARCH GARDEN SERIES**
Sat, 03/28/09
9 am-12 noon at BEES
Fruit Growing

THE BEES BUZZ: FRUIT FRENZY

Our third annual **Fruit and Citrus Tree Sale** began at 8 am on Saturday, February 21, and by 9:20 it was pretty much all over. The last two trees, a pair of LSU Gold figs, were sold at about 10:15.

Saturday, February 21 at 8:00 am

Saturday, February 21 at 10:00 am

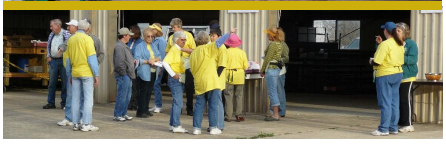
This year we had greatly increased the number of plants for sale, but the crowds increased even more.

Customers started lining up by about 7 am. Prospective buyers seemed patient and in good spirits as they waited, and most were pleased with their purchases as they reached the cashiers. It looks as though backyard fruit farming is the activity everyone wants in on.

Fast Moving Sales

We offered many varieties of citrus fruits, as well as pomegranates, pears, and peaches. The peaches looked wonderful, many in full bloom. We also had a generous supply of avocados, although not enough to satisfy demand.

Thanks to Sale Coordinators Gil Livanec and Barbara Bruyere, and to all the members who turned out to help with the sale, whether in our set-up phases or on the actual day.



And we appreciate our faithful customers. After all, the proceeds from our two annual plant sales financially support our primary mission of community education, as well as further development and maintenance of our demonstration gardens.

Submitted by: Ann McLain

Photos by: Neal McLain

MORE BUZZ

MARCH COMMUNITY EDUCATION SERIES

Our Saturday morning garden series will begin again in March in Angleton. As always, the classes are from 9 am until noon, at BEES on Hospital Drive, and often include opportunities to wander around our demonstration beds. The cost has been reduced this year, to $4 paid in advance or $5 at the door.

Three sessions are being offered in this series. The first, on **March 7**, is **"Growing Veggies in Big Gardens, Small Gardens, and No Gardens at All"**. This will be taught by our veggie team, including Debbie Soderman, Barbara Brown, Lee Withers, and Ray Michalik. It will include information about all the warm-season veggies, along with tips about preparing and managing the garden. There will be a section on square foot gardening, which is popular for growing in a confined space. There also will be some tips on making your own really attractive and very functional self-watering container that would be great for growing balcony tomatoes.

March 21, the first full day of spring, is the date for the second session. This is **"Growing Green: Composting, Lo-Tech Pest Control, and Lawn Alternatives"**. What a good way to celebrate spring! These topics will be presented by Ellen Pedisich and Paula Craig, with assistance from Carole Wenny and Ann McLain.

The **March 28** session will be **"Growing Tips for All Kinds of Fruit: Citrus, Berries, Stone Fruit, and More"**. This session will be less about which varieties to try and more about how to keep them happy and productive. Along with the very popular citrus fruits, we will cover less often grown fruits, and even some purely experimental things. This will be presented by Lee Withers, Ray Michalik, and Roy Morgan (whose experimental blueberries are blooming).

MAHONIA

Euphorbia (near right)

Melianthus (far right)

EXPERIMENTAL PLANTS

Okay, you've tried hostas and peonies more than once, and…didn't succeed. There's a reason why the international hosta registry is at the University of Minnesota! Then there are the plants that ought to do well here, but don't seem to often succeed. Hydrangeas come to mind (although one gardener has spectacular hydrangeas in Lake Jackson). And what about those Mediterranean or South African jewels that grow with abandon in California, but might not like high humidity and rainfall.

Who was the first Brazoria gardener to try an Agave americana hailing from the rocky plateaus in central Mexico and discover that gumbo and a 13' elevation suited it just fine?

Unless there's a lot of published information or extensive local knowledge to the contrary, don't accept that a plant is automatically impossible here until, in the words of Tony Avent of Plant Delights Nursery, you've killed it yourself three times in three different places.

Besides trying to discover the origin (with associated rainfall, soil, sun), find out where and how it's growing in cultivation (Google, Dave's Garden, GardenWeb and other plant forums, university web sites) which give clues to how persnickety it is. The plant's preferred pH is often lower than Brazoria's average pH of 7.8 (alkaline).

After replicating as many of the plant's conditions as possible, make adjustments depending on performance— moving to more or less sun, planting it higher, mulching with pea gravel for drainage, increasing acidity. Of course, that assumes that the plant hasn't melted away within two weeks as did the Phormium tenax from New Zealand trialed this past spring.

So far, I've had 2 years of success with Melianthus major (South African Honey Bush) and Euphorbia characias (Mediterranean Spurge). Mahonia x media (Grape Holly) cultivars 'Winter Sun' and 'Charity' are my latest tests. After a pitiful summer sulk 'Winter Sun' revved up during this winter. Will it bloom next winter as advertised? Stay tuned… and send in your attempts with "impossible" plants. We'll do a combined list next fall of what uncommon plants might grow well here.

Submitted by: Monica Krancevic

THREE THUGS ALERT

ASIAN CYCAD SCALE

When this pest snuck into Florida in the 1990s, it didn't bring its natural predators. Devastating to Sagos and other cycads, it was first reported in the Rio Grande Valley in 2004, reaching outbreak levels in 2006. By 2007 the scale was reported in 12 Texas counties, providing impetus for the Texas Department of Agriculture to quarantine the pest, thus preventing shipment of possibly infected cycads to "free" counties. To date, Brazoria is "free" (although there have been sporadic cases); Harris, Fort Bend and Montgomery are quarantined.

This scale is particularly damaging because it attacks all parts of the plant, including the root system. Control is very difficult because just a few "crawlers" left alive in the soil will begin another infestation.

Damage shows first with yellow spots on frond tops, then quickly develops "snowy" fronds. Plant death occurs within a year, usually less.

The two listed websites provide complete information about the scale and possible control:

http://www.ncipmc.org/alerts/cycadscale/cycad_scale.pdf
http://tinyurl.com/TAMU-ACS

CACTUS MOTH

Even if you're not enamored by prickly pears in the garden, the 31 U.S. species and 53 Mexican species in the Opuntia genus are an integral part of southern and southwestern ecosystems, as well as supplying economic benefits to Mexico and the SW U.S.

Another import, cactus moth quickly moved through Florida and into Alabama. The moths lay eggs along the spines; the hatched bright orange-red banded larva burrow into the cactus, eating it from the inside. Death of the plant comes with its total collapse.

There is a coalition of university and agricultural agents who are monitoring and trying to halt the cactus moth's westward expansion. Dr. Barron Rector, Texas A&M, is the Texas liaison and has recruited Master Naturalists to monitor Opuntias in Brazoria. Although Ike destroyed some of the monitoring stations, the search continues. If you see indication of this pest, notify Dr. Rector at b-rector@tamu.edu

Additional information about identification:
http://tinyurl.com/cactus-moth

CHILLI THRIP

The super thug of the group—**its host range includes 150+ (so far) common ornamental and important food crops.**

Impossible to i.d. without a compound microscope, its effects are more obvious: it attacks all above ground plant parts, causing bronzed and distorted leaves; bud drop; flower damage; plant stunting.

Unfortunately, herbicides and some diseases show similar effects so positive i.d. is extremely important.

It has been identified in Montgomery and Harris Counties — too close for comfort. TAMU entomologists fear that Ike may have blown the pest to other locations.

Dr. Scott Ludwig, TAMU, maintains a website that includes background info, controls and links to plant damage pix.
http://chillithrips.tamu.edu/

Be informed! Be vigilant!

ANN McLAIN, THE INQUIRING GARDENER: CERTIFIED MASTER COMPOSTER

Our composting guru, **Ellen Pedisich**, has been headed toward organic gardening all her life. As a child in Long Island she lived on a family farm, so she was quite familiar with the earth friendly principles of crop rotation and using manures as fertilizer. By 2005, she was ready to give organic methods a serious try. As with most of us, she had experienced what happens when commercial chemical fertilizers are applied too enthusiastically. Also, she was worried about the large quantity of weeds and other organic materials that were going from our demonstration beds directly to the burn pile. So when one of the new interns in 2005 wanted to have a go at an organic vegetable bed, Ellen was ready to jump in.

As plans took shape for the organic garden, Ellen and the intern (Bernadette Maness, no longer active) decided to get up-to-date information on composting. The Keep Pearland Beautiful organization was offering a composting program, so they signed up. The program required classroom instruction, a reading list, and volunteer hours teaching about composting. Ellen became a Certified Master Composter, and she has been directing our composting effort ever since.

In this era of "Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle", composting is a hot topic. After all, it is the ultimate in recycling. As Ellen tells us, we BEES gardeners bring her all the weeds and dead material from our beds, and she gives us back rich, fluffy, nutritious compost to grow a whole new round of green things.

As Ellen learned, and as she demonstrates to us every day, composting can be easy and cheap. The optimal size for a composting mass is one cubic yard. The wire cylinders in our composting area are just about that (3' x 3' x 3') size when they are filled. The material used to make these cylinders has a mesh of about two by four inches, close enough to keep most material in place, but allowing plenty of air flow.

Ellen starts each composting unit with a layer of woody material at the bottom. Although this will be slower to break down, she finds that it helps keep the pile aerated. There should be a layer of about one foot of "brown" material, topped with about three inches of "green". Brown is dead leaves, dead and dry tops from plants, and so on. Green is fresh weeds, veggie scraps from the kitchen, or tired (but not yet dry) flowers from a vase. Take note: using kitchen waste does not mean using any animal products or fats. Green means fresh vegetable matter only. Also, freezing veggie wastes for a bit before adding them to the compost pile will help them break down faster. Alfalfa pellets from the feed store can be substituted for green; they add a lot of nitrogen to the operation. When each brown plus green layer is assembled, Ellen waters it thoroughly. It should be as wet as a wrung-out sponge. The brown and green layering is continued until the cylinder is full. Ellen tops the pile with a loose layer of coarser stuff to help hold in the moisture.

Apart from keeping things moist, that's it until it's time to turn the pile. The method with the wire cylinders is pretty simple, at least if you can call on a little assistance to do the first step. That first step is to shake the cylinder a little, then lift it right off the composting material. Set the now empty cylinder next to the pile, and fork the material back in. This will turn it all upside down and aerate everything. While doing this you can add more green material if you wish. Make sure everything is moist again, and let it run on its decomposing way.

How do you know when to turn? Apparently, that depends on how much work you want to put into this compost. Ellen turns the compost at BEES three or four times a year. This rate of effort results in well-made compost in nine to twelve months. Turning more frequently will give you compost sooner.

When the compost is made, Ellen screens it before distributing it to deserving beds around BEES. She made a screen that fits on top of a garden cart, so the sieving step is pretty easy, too. The coarse stuff that can't go through the screen simply returns to the compost pile. She recommends that compost be layered on top of the garden beds, rather than being dug in. She believes that this is a more natural approach, and that it doesn't disrupt the worms and microorganisms that are so important to the soil.

At BEES, Ellen also has a set of composting bins. Using these bins works the same way as the wire cylinders, except that turning is a process of moving the pile from one bin into the empty one next to it. People with cranky shoulders or other achy places may find this activity easier.

Ellen says that when you decide to set up a composting system at home, you should be sure to put it near a source of water. Keeping things moist is the most important step. It's also a good idea to find a spot where neighbors won't be annoyed. In point of fact, the piles at BEES don't smell, and don't seem to attract much in the way of pests. At home, where you might use more kitchen waste, there might be more mouse traffic. A compost pile made according to directions and kept properly moist is not likely to be smelly or verminous.

There is a lot of debate about organic methods versus commercial fertilizers. There are strong arguments on both sides. Gardeners can get into some difficult situations either way. But some things about using compost are hard to beat. Fertilizer and compost both provide the basic nitrogen, potassium, and phosphorus that plants need.

Commercial fertilizers are better at telling you just how much you are putting on, if you pay attention. But well-made compost provides these nutrients in a softer, slow release way, and it may also provide micro-nutrients that aren't found in the purer formulations of manufactured fertilizer.

Perhaps the best reason to use compost, either alone or along with fertilizers, is that compost provides and maintains many beneficial micro-organisms that help our gardens thrive. Adding compost is the best thing you can do to improve the texture of your soil, whether you have sticky black gumbo or loose sterile sand. And you can do it yourself. Dirt cheap.

PLANTS OF THE MONTH

PERENNIAL OR ANNUAL: Euphorbia 'Diamond Frost'® ['Inneuphdia' PP17,567]

Size: Typical 2'x2' or larger

Shape: Rounded mound

Light: Partial sun-filtered sun; full sun might be possible

Soil/Water: Well drained; average

Flowers: Tiny white bracts, non-stop prolific; bees love them

Fertilize: Low requirements

Propagation: Stem cuttings

Milky sap may cause contact dermatitis in sensitive persons

Photo courtesy of Proven Winners®

EITHER WAY...A WINNER

The German company InnovaPlant bred 'Diamond Frost' by irradiating *Chamaesyce (Euphorbia) hypericifolia* which just happens to be native throughout the entire southern U.S. (including South and S.E. Texas) and into South America.

'Diamond Frost' exploded on the U.S. garden scene in 2005, winning awards across the country.

Although listed as an annual for zones below 10, this versatile beauty has proved ever-blooming and evergreen in southern Brazoria with no sign of winter damage.

Having the graceful look of baby's-breath with loads of wispy white bracts surrounding the tiny flowers, it's stunning as a contrast with larger leaved plants, both as a filler in containers and massed in the ground.

Grooming requires only a bit of shaping since deadheading is unnecessary. As a bonus, it's been pest free.

Readily available at nurseries.

NATIVE: Lonicera sempervirens (Coral or Trumpet Honeysuckle Vine)

Size: 10'-15' tall x 10' wide

Shape: Twining vine; medium density; not overly bushy

Light: Full sun to part sun

Soil/Water: Average; keep moist

Flowers: Red-orange w/ yellow interiors; not fragrant

Fruit: Translucent red berries

Fertilize: Low nitrogen

Propagation: Seeds for species; stem cuttings for cultivars

MADE IN THE U.S.A.

Ever since Lonicera japonica, Japanese honeysuckle, was found to be a such a bad actor, our native honeysuckle is gaining in popularity — and rightfully so.

Attractive to hummingbirds, bees, and some butterflies, its ovate, opposite evergreen leaves, nectar-rich colorful flowers, red berries and ease of culture make it a good choice for trellis, arbor or even large containers.

The species is readily available, but try some of the cultivars, most of which have longer bloom periods:

'Alabama Crimson' - bright red
'John Clayton' - all yellow; repeats
'Major Wheeler' - red/orange; repeats all year; mildew resistant
'Cedar Lane' - deep red
'Blanche Sandman' - orange/red; repeats; disease resistant
var. sulphurea or flava - yellow, but inferior to 'John Clayton'

Scout local nurseries or online for the cultivars.

Photo courtesy Texas AgriLIFE

LARGE SHRUB/SMALL TREE: Cordia boissieri (Texas Wild Olive, Anacahuita)

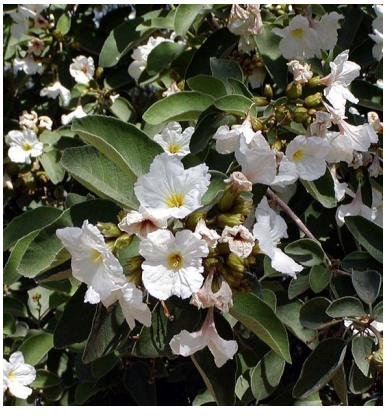


Photo courtesy of Stan Shebs, Wikipedia Commons, showing leaves and flowers

Size: 15'x15'; can be kept smaller

Shape: Rounded; prune to single trunk for tree

Light: Full sun

Soil/Water: Well-drained

Flowers: White funnel-shaped with yellow throats; blooms in flushes whenever warm

Fruit: Allegedly edible only after cooking, as in jellies

Fertilize: Regular for best growth

Propagation: Fresh seeds germinate readily; air layer; possibly stem cuttings

HUMMER & BEE MAGNET

Typically a 2'-3' tall scrub shrub in the arid lower Rio Grande Valley and adjacent Mexico, but a little TLC makes a handsome small tree with clusters of 2"-3" long flowers. There's no waiting for flowers either. Blooms begin when the plant is only 2' tall.

The evergreen leaves are grayish green and rough, with a lighter underside. Temps in the mid-20°s can damage twigs, but the tree itself is hardy to 18°.

Texas Wild Olive requires well-drained soil and is grown extensively further west as an ornamental. However, several trees are thriving in southern Brazoria in unamended soil; it's worth testing to determine soil moisture limits.

Fastidious gardeners take note: a few people report "messiness" from flower and fruit drop.

Some nurseries carry in Houston; readily available in the Austin/San Antonio area.

BCMGA

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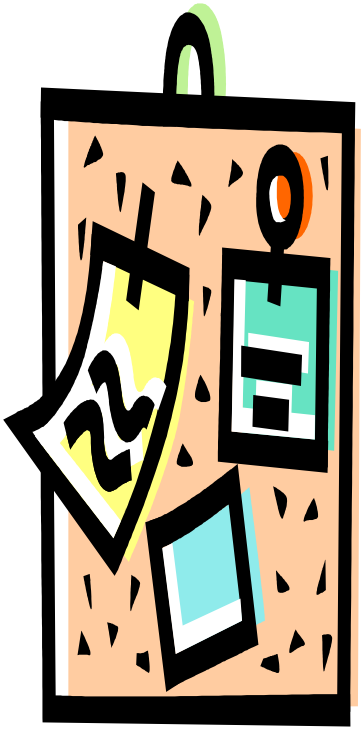
ANNOUNCEMENTS AND VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES



Volunteers Needed: BCMGA Spring Intern Training on Thursdays from 12:00pm—3:00pm through March 19th.
Assist speakers, answer general questions, put away equipment and general clean-up.
Contact Cindy Goodrum at cj_goodrum@yahoo.com (cj_goodrum@yahoo.com) as soon as possible.

State Master Gardener Conference in Marshall, TX: Registration Website Change
Continue to register for the 2009 State Texas Master Gardener Association Conference at:
http://2009tmgc.org/

Volunteers Always Needed: B.E.E.S. (the gardens), every Tuesday and Friday, 7:30am—12:00pm

Spring Plant Sale: Our Spring Plant Sale will be coming up soon. We would like for members who are dividing or rearranging beds and have plants that are unusual, hard to find (can't buy at the big box stores), or that are good reliable performers, to please let us know what they may have. Contact BeBe Brown or Cindy Goodrum to see if we can use them for the plant sale. Thanks for everyone's help and support. Cindy

Volunteers Needed: Open House at BEES on Saturday April 18, from 9 am until noon
Mingle with guests; help show how the gardens are progressing

The topic will be **"Something New for Your Garden"**. By then it should be warm and sunny and folks will be itching to perk up their beds with something nifty. (And just two weeks later, on May 2, we will be happy to sell them something to scratch that itch, at our Spring Plant Sale.)

Presentations will feature some of our coolest plants from the plant sale stock. We also will talk about pass-along plants, and some reasons why we all should look gift plants in the mouth before accepting them.

Ann McLain, Open House Coordinator