

# Brazoria County Master Gardeners.

"Do what we can, summer will have its flies. ~Ralph Waldo Emerson

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## Letter from the President

As I think about the last 3 months, record setting drought comes to mind. This drought is worse than anything we have seen before. According to the weather folks, the drought started last October. It was ironic that most of us were hoping last week that tropical storm Don would come our way. I know several of us have postponed new plantings since watering is becoming a problem due to low

water pressure. All we can do is hope El Niño returns.

On more positive events, all work has been completed on the Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC) grant. A representative from that organization came to BEES and inspected all the work that was part of the scope. Needless to say they were very impressed with what we accomplished and also with our facility. Thanks to Lee Withers and the many, many folks that worked on this project. The first event is our new training building is being planned now.

Also, work was completed and plantings have started in the enabling garden. Cynthia Leonard is in charge of the project and also submitted a request for a phase II grant. A repre-



sentative from the MS Society visited BEES and was also very impressed by phase I of the project. He also was impressed by our gardens and was going to recommend that we get the funds for phase II (about \$5,000). Thanks to Cynthia and Billy Heck and the many folks that helped on this project.

Finally thanks to Shawn and Jim for another great newsletter.

Ed


*"Kiss of the sun for pardon. Song of the birds for mirth. You're closer to God's heart in a garden than any place else on earth." -- Dorothy Frances Gurney*

## Summer Goodness

### *Zin-ful Marinated Tri-Tip*

#### Ingredients:

- 1 Large Tri-tip beef steak
- 4 or more fresh garlic cloves
- 1 bunch of fresh rosemary
- 1/3 cup good olive oil
- 1 cup Zinfandel wine (Toad Hollow)
- Salt & Pepper to taste

Trim excess fat from steak. Peel & slice garlic cloves . Using a sharp knife, cut small slits evenly throughout steak and insert the garlic slices. Rub the steak with salt and pepper, olive oil and coarsely chopped rosemary. Place the meat in a zip-lock bag and add the wine. Close the bag and make  sure the marinade is evenly distributed. Place in the refrigerator and marinate overnight. The next day, about an hour before grilling, remove the meat from the fridge to bring up to room temperature. Grill the tri-tip until the desired doneness is reached (medium -rare to medium for best taste). Let the meat rest for around 7 minutes . Slice diagonally, against the grain. Grilled asparagus with lemon zest works well as a side dish.

Adapted from a recipe of the Wine Club @ Toad Hollow



*Although the extended drought has played havoc with gardeners and large commercial growers there were decent numbers of quality tomatoes grown in Brazoria County this year. One theory is the drought kept the number of tomato pests and diseases in check more than usual. Pictured are several varieties of tomatoes grown in Brazoria County this year and recently harvested, including Chocolate cherry, Sun Gold Cherry, Celebrity, Homestead, Texas Wild Cherry and Persimmon.*

***"It's difficult to think anything but pleasant thoughts while eating a home-grown tomato."***      ***Lewis Grizzard***



## Not So Crazy About You Little Guy... Jim Molony/Pearland Journal



For several years, the aptly named Crazy Ant has been driving locals to distraction with its destructive habits.

But now, concerns are growing beyond the ants' propensity to damage electrical systems. Crazy Ants appear to have launched a campaign of conquest against a pillar of agriculture - the honey bee.

Texas is under attack from a tiny foe that has slowly but inexorably gained a large foothold in the Lone Star state.

These invaders were blamed when an area chemical plant shut down for a day and when Port of Houston electrical components were damaged. They've been spotted at NASA and Hobby Airport and have knocked out traffic lights, water pumps and alarm systems in Pearland.

During the last five years they have spread to 16 Texas counties and as far west as San Antonio while causing millions of dollars in damages to property, agriculture and equipment.

These invaders, known as Crazy Raspberry ants, have been a growing problem in recent years and those on the front lines of the war against this innocuous looking insect are concerned that the situation is getting worse with their recent attack on a key link in the food chain: honey bee hives.

"They're spreading at a phenomenal rate," said Tom Raspberry of Pearland, a pest management expert who discovered the ant in 2002. "We're

finding new infestations just about every other day. They're popping up everywhere, and yet most people are sticking their head in the sand hoping they will go away. I honestly believe it's going to devastate us on the gulf coast."

'An entomological hurricane'

Raspberry's concerns are echoed by other entomologists.

"I'm not a global warming nut trying to get funding," said Dr. Roger E. Gold, Professor & Endowed Chair at Texas A&M's Department of Entomology and head of the Center for Urban Structural Entomology. "This is a crisis. There are human life and quality of life issues that are at stake here and nothing has been done. I am warning everybody, somebody is going to have to face this problem because the genie is coming out of this bottle." Gold has been studying insects for 35 years and hasn't seen anything like the Raspberry ant.

"It's an entomological hurricane in the sense that you can see it coming and some people make preparations and others don't but when it hits it's too late for those who didn't prepare," Gold said.

"We've had warnings, now it's moving inland. Houston is the fourth largest city, you have a huge city that's going to get hit with this and the ramifications in terms of trade and homeland security are just horrendous."

How could such a tiny insect that doesn't bite humans pose such a huge threat?

"Their incredible numbers and extremely fast reproduction rate means they can quickly take over an area," Raspberry said. "They kill or run off beneficial insects. They get into electrical outlets and short out air conditioners, pool pumps and

*"The men of experiment are like the ant; they only collect and use. But the bee . . . gathers its materials from the flowers of the garden and of the field, but transforms and digests it by a power of its own." Leonardo Da Vinci*

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Jim Molony/Pearland Journal

to be tropical or sub-tropical, with St. Croix usually mentioned as a possible origin site.

Rasberry and Gold are both members of the Crazy Ant Task Force team assembled by Texas Agriculture Commissioner Todd Staples last October.

The 10-member task force is responsible for raising awareness of the ant to homeowners, identifying best practices for controlling and reducing the number of crazy ants and observing how the ant impacts the environment.

Other members are Dr. Shashank Nilakhe of TDA, Charles Brown of the USDA, Michael Quinn of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Mickey Merritt of the Texas Forest Service, Dennis Markwardt of the Texas Department of Transportation, Stephen Chandler of NASA, Steve Parris of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Jim Reaves of the Texas Nursery and Landscape Association. The group has documentation of crazy ant infestations in 16 Texas counties and as far away as San Antonio.

"In the 1970s they said fire ants wouldn't go north of Conroe," Rasberry said. "Well, today they're in Oklahoma City. These move faster and reproduce faster than fire ants ever thought about."

'Nothing gets rid of them'

More than once last year, the swarming ants disabled the alarm system at the Firestone at 2908 Broadway in Pearland, according to manager Mike Crowhurst.

"They haven't done that this year but they're everywhere," Crowhurst said. "They're all over the parking lot, I guess nothing gets rid of them."

Rasberry has personally witnessed infestations recently at the Pearland Library and in the Silver-

lake subdivision in Pearland, the Beamer-Hughes Road area near I-45 and Friendswood.

"The Forests of Friendswood and the Lakes of San Joaquin in the back end, that's the only two locations we know about in Friendswood right now," he said.

The ants are in Houston, and large concentrations have been found in Channelview and Pasadena. Colonies have recently been discovered in Rosharon.

James Allphin of Channelview said the ants showed up at the Fellowship of Nations church at Woodforest and Uvalde about a month ago.

"I see them everywhere now, mostly outside, but they have gotten into the mechanical building and they crawl up the wall," Allphin said.

Allphin initially thought they were sugar ants.

"I sprayed them with some insecticide I got from the store, that worked for about a day, but they keep coming back," he said.

He summoned an exterminator and was informed that the church was infested with Crazy Rasberry ants.

"I'd never heard of them before," he said.

#### *Threat to bees*

The ants have been characterized as nuisance insects, a determination that puts them on the back burner as far as funding prioritization. But the attack on the bee hives may change that.

Bill Whittington, a beekeeper from Dickinson, has lost eight hives to crazy ant attacks in the span of a few weeks.

"They don't eat the honey, they go in there for the pollen and the larvae and lay eggs in those cells," Whittington said. "There's millions of them. We had to gas all the hives. I'm not the only one. We need to do something quick because they're just going to get worse."

Whittington said he's spoken with farmers whose livestock have been having problems with the ants.

*"Whenever I see an old lady slip and fall on a wet sidewalk, my first instinct is to laugh. But then I think, what if I was an ant, and she fell on me. Then it wouldn't seem quite so funny." Jack Handy*

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areas," Coplin said via e-mail last week. "I burned \$800 worth of honey combs two weeks ago that was infested with crazy ant eggs."

Coplin, however, does not want the Crazy Raspberry ant declared an agricultural pest.

"I think I can speak for myself, migratory beekeepers and other Texas beekeepers that we are against the ant being declared an agricultural pest," Coplin said. "A \$10,000 to \$15,000 loss is nothing compared to the effect of poisons, restrictions and quarantines. Mother Nature has a way of handling these things."

"My livelihood, the bees and your families' lives depends on less pollution and poisoning in this fine area on the Gulf Coast. Mosquito control, herbicides are slowly killing us all."

#### Containment

Coplin believes the heavy restrictions already in place in states like Texas and California should contain the problem.

"Shipping bees from Gulf Coast of Texas to California is a multi-million dollar operation, approximately 200,000 hives are shipped into California for almond pollination (and) California does not want these ants nor the fire ants," he said.

"The bees are checked three times before entering orchards. (The) cost of shipping one truck load (is) \$5,000. If the truck is turned around it's another \$5,000 return shipping (or a) \$10,000 loss to the beekeeper, not counting time and labor. We cannot ship out of quarantined areas. So yes it is a pest for the beekeeper, but it is just one of many that we deal with everyday."

Although there is disagreement over whether Crazy Raspberry ants should be declared agricultural pests, no one is disputing the ants are killing honey bee larvae.

"If you have no pollination you have no fruits and vegetables," Gold said. "This is hitting the honey bee at the same time we're already having this hive decline. It's a double whammy for one of the most beneficial insects in the world."

"Without the bees, we don't have food," Raspberry said. "In my opinion these ants pose a clear and present danger to our way of life. If we don't act now the consequences could be irreversible."

#### A battle plan

The task force and scientists at Texas A&M are trying to come up with a battle plan to combat the ants, but before that can happen research is needed.

"We can't get the research until the federal government declares it an agricultural pest," Raspberry said. "It's ridiculous that it hasn't been declared a pest already with all the damage it's done already. And now it's killing honey bees."

Last year the TDA agreed to grant \$30,000 to monitor movement of the ants, but that money hasn't arrived yet.

"You would think the federal government, with all the stimulus money and grants out there, would do something, but no one in the federal government has stepped up, and that's just wrong," Gold said. "We've had multiple meetings with them. We've tried to work with the congressional people with them, they just don't show any interest. The bottom line is we're not getting any help, the ants are spreading, and the losses in terms of financial potential are too large to estimate."

Gold said there's no question in his mind the Crazy Raspberry ant is an agricultural pest.

"There's absolutely no problem in proving that if people will only open their eyes and see," he said. Even if it is finally recognized as such, the research might take years before a remedy is found. That might be too late.

"It would take that long to work out the biology and control methods," Gold said. "Research never solves a problem immediately."

*"He was in love with life as an ant on a summer blade of grass"*

*Ben Hecht*

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structures. The two chemicals exempted you can use only twice a year, so when do you use those silver bullets?"

Getting the ant declared an agricultural pest is a step the government has been unwilling to take thus far, though Texas Agriculture Commissioner Todd Staples made the state's position clear when he announced the formation of the task force 10 months ago.

"These crazy ants have attacked parts of Houston in droves, making it almost impossible for residents to enjoy their yards and even disturbing some business operations," Staples said then. "No Texan should have to endure such a pest. The creation of this task force is a testament to our commitment to protect Texans from this unwanted insect."

Today Staples still considers Crazy Raspberry Ants a serious problem. Last month the department initiated a study of the migration patterns of the ants with the goal of determining the best management controls.

"We know now that there are 16 counties that we have found them in," said Bryan Black, Texas Dept. of Agriculture Assistant Commissioner for Communications. "We have a survey and a study going on right now. We're going out talking to beekeepers in each area and trying to determine if these are isolated incidents or whether they are widespread in the area."

Where do they nest?

Another disturbing aspect of this situation is no one knows the true extent of the crazy ant problem since Crazy Raspberry ants do not have a defined nest and will nest and lay eggs under anything that holds moisture like mulch or pots.

"Wildlife studies are needed, because we're seeing that it's not just the beehives, where you have the

se ants there are fewer birds, fewer other insects, they're taking out fire ants," Gold said. "They're taking out insects that are a part of the food chain, so where the ants are the diversity in terms of wildlife, like lizards, toads, the like, they're fewer of them because the ants are taking away the insects they eat."

Public awareness of the pest is limited and many known infestations haven't raised much attention. The infestation that shut down the chemical plant in the Pasadena area for a day was not publicized, for obvious reasons.

The Port of Houston had ant issues with some of the high tech equipment used to monitor hazardous material. Port officials referred all calls to Homeland Security. Calls to the Texas office of Homeland Security were not returned.

Raspberry did not want to go into details regarding client issues but did confirm his firm received a call from Homeland Security regarding ants at Jacintoport. He also said he eradicated three known crazy ant colonies on NASA property and the bees have not returned.

"We're set up to inspect Hobby Airport in September," he said. "They're all over the edge of Hobby. Both airports are at risk and we're still not doing anything."

While Raspberry, Gold, the rest of the task force and the Dept. of Agriculture continue their efforts to find a workable solution, the problem is viewed as one that will very likely keep spreading.

"It's going to go statewide and beyond, it's just a matter of time," Gold said.

Raspberry knows it has meant more business for his firm, but to him this is beyond business as usual.

To him, this is a crisis.

"I feel like it's my duty to try and tell anyone who will listen," he said. "I honestly believe this is going to devastate us on the gulf coast unless we do something. Even if we do, I'm afraid it might be too late."

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***"Be on the alert, like the red ant that moves with its claws wide open.***

***Uganda African Proverb quote***



### *Eggplants are no Fairytale!*

By Jim Molony, BCMG intern

For many years I was never much of an eggplant fan. I had success growing them in the south, they're not hard to grow, the problem was the effort typically expended to produce one Florida Queen, Black Beauty or any of the other "typical" eggplants -- and by typical I mean the dark purple to almost black beauties the size of a small football -- seemed to me an awful lot of commitment for the number and quality of eggplant the plant usually yielded. They aren't what I would call prolific, and more than once I've nurtured an eggplant along only to have an unsupported branch snap. To me it was too much time and effort for too little to show on the dinner table. Besides, the big eggplants, unless you soak them in water, tend to be greasy.

For these reasons for many years I forsook growing eggplants for other less finicky vegetables. All of that changed the last two years. I still do not grow the typical eggplants, but I have found another that grows so well and tastes so good I have expanded the number of plants in my garden.

The difference is I am now growing Fairy Tale eggplants, a hybrid with outstanding taste, high productivity and one that requires little maintenance.

The genesis of this transformation came a couple of years ago, when I was talking with Liverpool grower

Brian Crabtree about the varieties he grew, Calioke and Santa Rosita. They are the small variety eggplant, similar to Ichiban, but in my opinion much better tasting. I tried those, along with Fairy Tale, Antigua and a few others and the Fairy Tale was by far the best producing and best tasting of the lot. Though not easy to germinate the Fairy Tale goes from seed to producing in 60 days or less. The plant is so beautiful I know some people who use it as an ornamental. Fairy Tale eggplant has large dark green leaves and woody stems. It grows 18 inches or so tall and 18-24 inches wide. It produces dozens of purple-lavender blooms tinged with yellow that are followed by clusters of two to five purple with white tinges fruit. The fruits should be picked when they are about four inches long, longer than that they can begin to fade.

They are very prolific. The six plants I tried as a test last year produced a few hundred fruits, and we had eggplant from June until December. The plants like moisture, but not wet feet, so we kept them well watered and mulched and other than feed them with a sea kelp mixture every three weeks they required no more care. The bugs left them alone. Any dish you can use eggplant in, Fairy Tale will not disappoint. They are small, so it will take more of them than a typical eggplant but they are creamy and not bitter. I cut them up into disks, skin on, soak them in a bowl of cool water for about an hour and then dredge them in flour. After that I drop them in a skillet with a little olive oil, sprinkle sea salt and pepper and in about six minutes (turn them once) I have an appetizer or side dish that is healthy and very tasty.

The other plus is these plants do not need to be supported and can be grown in a large pot. As long as they get plenty of sun (six hours or so per day in our area is average, but I have seen the plant produce with less than that, see photo), and adequate water Fairy Tale eggplant will produce for you.

I'm a fan, and if you try these wonderful little eggplants, I'm betting you will be too.

***DID YOU KNOW?*** Eggplant is a member of the nightshade family and is native to India. The early varieties were bitter, but cultivation and crossbreeding have greatly improved the flavor. Eggplant is related to potatoes, tomatoes, and peppers.

# Spring Plant Sale Report

By Jim Molony  
BCMG intern

Although sales were about the same as last year the 2011 Brazoria County Master Gardeners Spring Plant Sale was an unqualified success.

The crowd showed up early and quickly purchased much of the available ornamentals, herbs and vegetables. Total sales for the April 16 event were \$8,558, slightly less than the \$8,725 the sale generated in 2010. Net profits, however, were flat with \$3,502 this year compared to \$3,531 in 2010. Sale day income was down by \$940 (12 percent) this year, but was offset by \$850 in vegetable plant sales during the citrus sale.

BCMG President Ed Barrios said " Thanks to all the folks that worked so hard during the year and during the plant sale to make this income possible. We can do many projects for \$3,500!"



"I'm not really a career person. I'm a gardener, basically."-- George Harrison



July 2011

## Attention Master Gardeners!

Brazoria County Master Gardeners Association interns Shawn Helm and Jim Molony have taken over the responsibility of producing the quarterly newsletter for the volunteer organization, effective with this issue, the Spring 2011 edition. This is your newsletter and we want to continue to make it a useful resource for Brazoria County gardeners. The newsletter is published in April, July, October and January. Shawn and Jim welcome any submitted items, whether listings for the calendar or tips on a specific plant. They can be reached via email at [shawn.helm@yahoo.com](mailto:shawn.helm@yahoo.com) or [jmolonyjr@gmail.com](mailto:jmolonyjr@gmail.com)

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