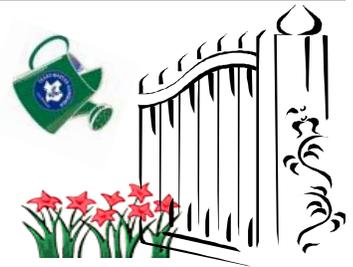




Ellis County Master Gardener's E-Gardening Newsletter



Volume IV, Issue 8

Official E-letter of the Ellis County Master Gardeners Association, Waxahachie, Texas

September, 2010

Welcome to the Ellis County Master Gardener's **E-Gardening** newsletter. The purpose of this newsletter is to give you a month by month agenda of what you should be doing to your landscape. We will be featuring horticulture articles that we hope you will find interesting, important dates where you can find the Master Gardeners speaking, demonstrating and passing out information relative to your garden. If you would like to receive this newsletter monthly via your email address, log onto our website www.ECMGA.com, click on **subscribe**, and it will be sent around the 1st of every month. Best of all; it's FREE!
Melinda Kocian, editor

What's Happening in September

Garden Inspirations

8:00 am, Saturday's - "Classes" at the Waxahachie Farmer's Market.....\$10.00 each

(last booth, south side of courthouse; left side of street)

- September 4 "Fall Floral Arrangement"
- September 11 "Square Foot Gardening.....for the Fall"
- September 18 "Photo Contest"
- September 25 "Organic Gardening by Marilyn Simmons"
- October 2 "2011 VIP sign up and info meeting"

For more info, contact Marilyn Simmons at 214-497-3918

Wednesday, September 1—8-Week Fall Gardening Class. How to garden successfully in North Texas soil, especially Ellis County. And dealing with our critters. Hands on, informative workbook and an investment of your time to learn more about fall gardening. \$275.00 (that's just \$35.00/wk). Signup underway now. Marilyn Simmons, 108 Ridge Crest, Waxahachie. Call 214-497-3918 for more info.

Monday, September 20 - 7:00 pm—Garden Inspirations' Fall Gardening. We are blessed in Texas to have almost year-round gardening! We will feature vegetables that can be planted now and fall techniques. Marilyn Simmons, 108 Ridge Crest, Waxahachie. Call 214-497-3918 for more info.

Saturday, September 25—10:00am and 1:00pm - Fall Wildflower Walks @ Cedar Ridge Preserve. Jim Varnum hosts both walks. Adult and children appropriate. Each walk lasts about 2 hours. For more info, call 214-543-2055 or jvarnum@aol.com

Thursdays, October 7 - October 28 - 6:00-8:00—"Ag 101" -Designed for New or Small Acreage Landowners—Join Mark Arnold, County Extension Agent, Agriculture & Natural Resources. An experienced instructor, Mark will be covering topics such as soils and soil fertility, soil testing, pasture management, basic livestock productions and pond management. Cost \$21.00.

Saturday, Nov, 13-Cedar Ridge Preserve -Save the Date!!! 2 fall birding field trips!

Light House for Learning

(With the Ellis County Master Gardeners)

For reservations, Call Melissa Cobb, 972-923-4631

Monday, September 27 - 6:00-7:30—Fall Bulbs & Iris Rhizomes—Join Monica Nyenhuis to learn about the new varieties that will tolerate our soils and climate, as well as how to divide and plant them. Plus you may take home a rhizome to plant in your garden. Cost: \$11.00.

(Continued on page 2)



Listen to KBEC.....

Saturday mornings at 9:00 a.m. on 1390 AM.

The Ellis County Master Gardeners have a 5-minute segment every week, offering you helpful information on what you need to be doing in your landscape, as well as "happenings" around the county. Be sure to listen in!

Melinda Kocian

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It's September - What Needs to be Done



Passion flower (*Passiflora incarnate*)

Photo by Pam Daniel

They begin blooming in July and continue until frost. The vines can easily grow up to 15 feet in a season. Grow it on a fence or trellis. The Gulf Fritillary butterfly and its larvae are especially attracted to the Passion flower and feed upon the plant. Butterflies are often present in large numbers and if you watch closely you may witness the life cycle of the butterfly!



Planting and Sowing

- Time to dig, divide and replant, spring-blooming perennials such as iris, daylilies, coneflowers, gaillardia, violets, lirioppe and ajuga. Amend the planting bed with compost and replant. Give away any divided plants not needed.
- Plant trees, shrubs, and perennials from containers. Fall planting will allow them to establish roots before hot and dry weather arrives next year.

Fertilizing and Pruning

- Root-prune trees and shrubs to be transplanted this winter.
- Fertilize lawns with a high nitrogen food and apply a pre-emergent to prevent germination of winter and spring weeds.

Garden Watch

- Spray roses for blackspot and mildew which can be extremely troublesome in September and October.
- Apply herbicide containing MSMA to eliminate perennial grassy weeds such as dallisgrass in Bermuda grass. Read and heed label instructions.
- Applications of pre-emergent weed killers must be made early this month, before seeds begin to germinate. Depending on which weeds you are targeting, it may be necessary to apply two different products; one for broad-leaved winter annuals such as henbit, dandelions and chickweed, and one for grassy winter weeds such as Rescuegrass and annual blue grass.

This and That

- Prepare beds for spring flowering bulbs to be planted in October and November. Raise the planting area for good drainage.

Tips for September

Diversity in the landscape can actually promote healthy plants and less disease by encouraging beneficial organisms. Most pests target a certain species or family of plants, and when there isn't enough food to support a population, the pest does not survive.

(Continued from page 1)

Monday, October 4 - 6:00-7:30—Planning for Next Year's Planting—Join Ginger Cole and start thinking about a vegetable garden in the back yard next spring. Learn about site selection, soil preparation, amendments and planning for success. Cost: \$11.00.

Monday, October 11 - 6:00-7:30—Hobby Greenhouse Management—Join Jim and Pat Dockins to learn from installing to maintaining a healthy environment where plants will survive; from saving tropicals to jump starting next summer's garden with seed propagation. Cost: \$11.00.

Monday, October 18 - 6:00-7:30—Gardening for the Birds—From Jean Wammack learn which birds call Ellis Co. home and which ones migrate through. Plant a garden to attract songbirds and beneficial insect eaters to your backyard plus three essentials: food, water and safe housing. Cost: \$11.00.

Thursday, October 21 - 6:00-7:30—Holiday Gifts from the Herb Garden—Join Arlene Hamilton and learn how to make gifts such as jellies/jams, culinary wreaths, sugars, salts and more from the fresh herbs you have been growing. Impress friends and family. Cost: \$11.00.

Monday, October 25 - 6:00-7:30—Rainwater Harvesting—Sue Pille will show you how you can have pure, no chemicals and free rainwater from an old concept with a new value, at a time of water shortages and droughts. Learn how to capture, divert, store and distribute rainwater for use later. Cost: \$11.00.

Monday, November 1 - 6:00-7:30—Backyard Composting—Join Lee Gabor to learn what to do with all those leaves and grass clippings. Fall is the perfect time to start a backyard compost pile. You'll produce rich organic matter for your garden and landscape next spring. Cost: \$11.00.

Vegetable Gardening

By Pat Dockins

Ellis County Master Gardener



Vegetable Gardening In September

As I write this article, tomorrow will be what appears to be the first day of below 100° degree temperatures. It has been difficult to think of gardening much less starting a new one. In our garden we have the black clay that is so prevalent here in Waxahachie; it is so dry that even when you water in the morning by the afternoon it is dry again. Having said all that I know that soon we will receive blessed temperatures ranging in the 90s (yes, after 104° plus degrees, temperatures in the 90s is a blessing) and if we want to enjoy veggies that we know we planted with our own two hands and what has been sprayed on them, or not, we must get busy. While preparing this article I dug out all my gardening books and magazines and went on line for information to share with you. What seems to be the topic this month is this: You don't have to go out and till and make a "garden" – use what you have. Pull up those annuals in your flowerbeds that are spent and plant some lettuce, some Swiss chard, and other veggies. I think beets have a pretty leafy top. Turnips here and there, wouldn't look bad. Carrots with their feathery plumes are pretty. A tomato plant with basil around it would be nice. You might want to soak beet seeds overnight to help them germinate quicker. Also, cover your seeds with vermiculite or sand so you'll know where you've planted them. Keep the soil moist until seedlings have emerged.

Consider this: **container gardening**. William D. Adams and Thomas R. LeRoy have some growing tips from their book "*Commonsense Vegetable Gardening*". You can use 1-gallon or 5-gallons containers to grow all sorts of vegetables – pole beans, beets, carrots, cabbage and other cole crops; lettuces, spinach, radishes, etc. Just make sure you choose containers that have drain holes. Use soil mix, not garden soil. But know this: containers will need frequent watering, especially during hot weather. Beans and tomatoes need full sun but the rest do well in full to partial sun. All plants need water-soluble or timed-release fertilizers. You can grow your own or look for transplants at your local nursery the first part of September.

Our okra plants have just taken off. Yellow squash is doing good too. Cucumbers are doing so-so. Tomatoes still have small little tomatoes on them but they are sooo good. Beats anything in the stores. Speaking of squash: last spring the squash bugs had the

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Featured Texas Wild Flower of the Month

Submitted by Melinda Kocian
Ellis County Master Gardener



Argemone squarrosa Greene

Poppy Family (Papaveraceae)

White Pricklepoppy

Range: 1-7 (Ellis County is range 4)

Size: 3-4 feet

Blooms: April through October, Annual/Biennial

Pricklepoppy often colonizes several acres of abandoned fields or overgrazed land. Plants in this family, which include the opium poppy, are slightly poisonous. White pricklepoppy is easily recognized by its large, cup-shaped flowers with wrinkled petals. It is centered with a globe of numerous yellow or reddish stamens surrounding a purple stigma. Alternate leaves are stiff, stalkless and bluish green, with conspicuous blue veins. They are deeply lobed and edged with spine-tipped teeth. The plant has yellow sap. Flowers and sap of related species vary in color. Flowers may be pale pink, white, lavender, or yellow and the sap can be red, orange, yellow or milky white. Although avoided by livestock pricklepoppy is very attractive to its insect pollinators. You can usually observe their feeding frenzy by taking a close look into the flower's center. Seeds of *Argemone* yield oil and are used for food. They can also be ground and applied to sores.

Herb of the Month

*By Arlene Hamilton
Ellis County Master Gardener*



September 2010 Herb of the Month

September doesn't always feel like fall in Texas but cool weather is coming and now is the perfect time to prepare your garden for cool weather herbs. Get out there and survey the summer damage. Pull up those sad looking brown sticks and bushes that once were colorful calendula, nasturtiums, dill and other annuals that did not survive the summer. Cut back your mints and lemon balm; and be sure to keep deadheading to promote more green growth. Give the garden a light coat of fertilizer and work it in. I use mushroom compost. Let the area rest for a few weeks until it's time to plant cool weather herbs. (More about that next month).

The new varieties of **thyme** didn't fair too well in my garden but the old standbys, English, French and lemon only require a trimming. I planted quite a bit of a new rose scented thyme last spring, hoping to have it spread out onto the pathway. It did well until August and now I have patches of dead twigs that managed to kill all the grass under them. The elfin, pink chintz and Doone valley that are growing between the sandstone in the patio are doing well but I give credit to that area having afternoon shade.

Remember to keep cutting back your **basil** to keep it producing and sweet tasting. Now is the time to make some basil pesto. I freeze mine in ice cube trays then dump them into a zipped freezer bag. Next winter when we are preparing pasta, soups or stews I will pull one or two out of the bag and drop it in the pot near the end of cooking. The aroma fills the house with the smell of summer!

Both my Italian and Greek **oregano** flowered and set seeds, which are still green, so it's not too late to cut the stems back severely. I harvest the long stems, cut off the seed heads, tie the stems into bundles and hang in my potting shed to dry. After they are crisp dry a quick pull of the stem through my hand will strip all of the leaves off the stem. The spicy smelling leaves are ready to bottle and store in the spice cabinet or on a dark shelf.

The **parsley**, which is a cool weather biennial, thinks summer is its second season so both the flat leaf and curly have flowered and set seed. They will be pulled out and tossed into the compost along with the rest of the tired plants.

Remember, there are still plenty of hot days in September so frequent and deep watering is necessary. Also, **pests** seem to get a second foothold on plants as the nights cool down. Keep checking for caterpillars. Pick off the caterpillars unless they are one of our beautiful butterflies. Aphids and scale can be controlled with insecticidal soap sprayed upward from underneath the leaf.

Here is my favorite **Pesto** recipe:

In a food processor, using the steel blade, process 1 bunch basil, 1 bunch parsley, and 4 cloves garlic for about 30 seconds. Add 1/2 cup grated Parmesan cheese and 1/2 cup pine nuts. With the processor running, slowly add 1/2 cup extra virgin olive oil. Process until well mixed. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Refrigerate or freeze.

(Continued from page 3)

plants devastated before we even knew they were there. This time when my husband Jim planted, after the seedlings came up and before they had begun to bloom, he sprinkled around the base of each plant with Sevin dust then pulled the mulch around them and sprinkled more Sevin dust on top of the mulch. So far we haven't had any squash bugs or squash vine borers.

How are your tomato plant cuttings? If they are still green and have life in them, hang on. As soon as the weather gives a little respite they will probably take off. My broccoli plants that I hung on to haven't done well. I know, I know, I hear all of you out there saying "Duh?!" But I just had to try. Oh well, maybe next year.

Pesticide Information: It's now possible for people to receive answers quickly by telephone, to commonly asked questions about pesticides, emergency information for use in potential poisoning episodes, or assistance with such problems as pesticide clean-up and disposal, laboratory analyses or pesticide incident investigation seven days a week, from 6:30 am to 4:30 pm Pacific Time. The toll-free number to the National Pesticide Information Center is: 1-800-858-7378.

Landscape Gardening

By Gail Haynes, Ellis County Master Gardener

Spider Lilies (*Lycoris radiata*), Oxblood Lilies (*Rhodophiala bifida*) and Rain Lilies (*Zephranthes* spp)

Dr. William C. Welch, Professor & Landscape Horticulturist,
Texas AgriLife Extension Service
Texas A&M University, College Station, TX



One indication of an eventual end to our long, hot summers is the emergence of several bulbous perennials. Spider lilies (*Lycoris radiata*), oxblood lilies (*Rhodophiala bifida*) and certain rainlilies (*Zephranthes* species suddenly appear and add color and interest to our tired, heat-weary gardens. These plants are not natives, but they appear to be, since they often come back year after year and slowly increase in numbers and flower production.

All three plants have in common that they produce most of their foliage during the winter and spring, go dormant during the heat of summer, then flower in early fall. They actually require a dormant period during the heat of summer when little or no water is needed. Artificial watering during this period may be harmful to these plants. Spider lilies and oxblood lilies are especially sensitive to over watering during their "baking period;" therefore, it is best to plant these tough and hardy bulbs where they are out of reach of normal sprinkler systems or artificial watering.



Spider lilies are a novelty in the world of ornamental plants. Each spring the strap-shaped foliage appears, ripens, then dies down with the heat of summer. In September, usually after a soaking rain, clusters of red, pink, white or yellow flowers suddenly spring forth from the ground. Stems may reach 18 -24 inches, and they are topped with spidery-like flowers with wavy-edged segments and long stamens. They are very easily grown, especially in the eastern third of the state. The red form (*Lycoris radiata*) is much more common than the others and is the easiest to grow.

Oxblood lilies are another introduction from Argentina. They were introduced by a German-Texas plantsman named Heinrich Oberwetter, an early colonist in central Texas. Oxblood lilies appear to be equally well adapted to heavy clay or deep, sandy soils. The flowers resemble small red amaryllises and are borne several to a stem. Foliage is strap-like and emerges after flowering to flourish through the winter, and then it yellows and disappears by summer.

Among the large and diverse group of plants known as rainlilies, the most common cultivated form is *Zephranthes candida*, the white rainlily, which is sometimes called "Autumn Crocus" because of its tendency to bloom profusely in the fall. It somewhat resembles monkey grass and is useful as an edging plant in the garden during the fall, winter, and spring when its foliage is most abundant and attractive. White rainlilies are native to the shores of Rio de la Plata, the River of Silver, in Argentina. Flowers appear mostly in late summer and fall, usually beginning with the first autumn showers.

Rainlilies, oxblood lilies and spider lilies are all propagated by dividing mature clumps of bulbs. This can be done successfully at any season, but transplanting just after the foliage starts dying down in late spring or early summer is less likely to interrupt their bloom cycle. Commercial availability is limited on all three of these plants although it appears to be improving.

Garden Checklist for September, 2010

- Continue to give established crinum plants plenty of water and organic fertilizer at this time to encourage repeat flowering.
- Rejuvenate heat-stressed geraniums and begonias for the fall season by lightly pruning, fertilizing, and watering.
- Don't allow plants with green fruit or berries to suffer from lack of moisture. Hollies will frequently drop their fruit under drought conditions.
- Prepare the beds for spring-flowering bulbs as soon as possible. It is important to cultivate the soil and add generous amounts of organic matter to improve the water drainage. Bulbs will rot without proper drainage.
- Plantings at this time can provide landscape color for three seasons in central, east, and south Texas. Annuals set out early enough will bloom as soon as Thanksgiving, and frequently last until Memorial Day. Annuals that should soon be available in nurseries and garden shops include petunias, calendulas, pansies, snapdragons, stock, sweet peas, and violas (from seed).
- Continue a disease-spray schedule on roses, as blackspot and mildew can be extremely damaging in September and October. Funginex, used every 7 to 14 days, will usually give excellent control.
- Christmas cactus can be made to flower by supplying 12 hours of uninterrupted darkness and cool nights (55 degrees F.) for a month, starting in mid-October. Keep plants on the dry side for a month prior to treatment.
- Replenish mulches around trees and shrubs, and water every 3 to 5 days.
- Start cool-season vegetables, such as mustard, lettuce, arugula, broccoli, carrots, and turnips, from seed in well prepared beds.
- Harvest okra, peppers, squash, and other vegetables often to encourage production.



New Stars on the Horizon

By Shirley Campbell

Ellis County Master Gardener

To become a Texas Superstar™ isn't easy. Only the toughest, most reliable and best looking plants make the cut. Every plant earning the Texas Superstar™ designation undergoes several years of extensive field trials by Texas AgriLife Extension Service. During the field trials, plants receive minimal soil preparation, minimal water and no pesticides.

The four plants highlighted here have made the grade. Ask for these at your local nurseries.

Lowery's legacy cenizo (*Leucophyllum langmaniae*) was selected for its profuse and frequent flower displays. Its sage-green foliage is a wonderful backdrop for the lavender flowers. Compared to most selections of Texas sage, it is not as dependent on changes in relative humidity for flowering and can bloom more often during the course of the summer than other selections. This woody shrub grows to 5 feet in full sun. Cenizo is tolerant of most soils as long as they are well drained and can be used in containers on sunny patios.

Firecracker jatropha (*Jatropha integerrima*) is a spectacular shrub in bloom, which is most of the year in warmer portions of the state and spring to frost in colder locations. This subtropical evergreen shrub has glossy leaves and clusters of star-shaped bright scarlet or vermilion flowers. Jatropha flowers best in full sun, but plants will remain attractive in partial shade. In our zone; zone 8A, it is treated as a summer annual growing 3-5 feet tall. It can be used as a container plant to attract butterflies and hummingbirds.

Rocket larkspur (*Consolida ambigua*) comes in colors ranging from various shades of blue or purple-blue to pink and white. This reseeding annual has a backward-projecting spur, formed by the upper petal of the flower. The soft, lacey foliage makes a great backdrop for the showy flower spikes or panicles of flowers that come in both single and double forms. Growing in full sun to partial shade, it reaches 36-inches in height. Seeded in the fall, it will reward you with flowers in the spring. Look for these seeds in your wildflower seed catalogs.

Grandma's yellow rose (*Rosa 'Nachogdoches'*) is a deep yellow with 17-25 petals and repeatedly blooms from spring until the first hard frost. Its new leaves have a shade of bronze, then turn dark green. This repeat bloomer has a light and spicy fragrance making it a wonderful cut flower. Give this rose full sun for at least six hours each day. It adapts to our alkaline clay soil as long as drainage is adequate. Use it as an accent or in your perennial beds; anywhere you can use a 4-5 foot shrub.

The Ultimate Solar Machine

By Shirley Campbell

Ellis County Master Gardener

The ultimate solar machine runs on solar energy, soil, water, air and love.

- The ultimate solar machine runs on polluted air, and gives back clean air. It is a living breathing air conditioner.
- One acre of these machines can remove approximately 3.7 tons of sulfur-dioxide from the air each year.
- The same acre can remove nearly 12.9 tons of dust from the air each year. 440 yards of forested green space can remove 80% of the airborne particle smog. One acre absorbs the carbon dioxide from approximately 50 cars, as well as the polluting ozone from 8 cars.
- The ultimate solar machine builds healthy soils and helps prevent erosion.
- The ultimate solar machine is a clean water machine --- it purifies water for free.
- It is completely bio-degradable. In the process, one large machine can be converted to the energy equivalent of 2 to 12 barrels of oil.
- The ultimate solar machine can heat your home, or cool it. It is the equivalent of 9 air conditioners running all day. Green belts as narrow as 165-300 feet can reduce summer temperatures by 40°F compared with the city center. Pavement and rooftops reflect 30% of solar heat into the air. These machines absorb all but 5%; converting it into usable wood.
- Many ultimate solar machines (fruit and nut trees) will even feed you. On a large scale, they require less fertilizer and keep the soil healthier than any other crop.
- The ultimate solar machine replaces its own worn out parts and has a lifetime guarantee. The ultimate solar machine may last for 2000 to 4000 years.

It is of course a tree!

Have you hugged your trees lately?

Cutting Up with Roses...or...Rose Rustling 101

By Shirley Campbell, Ellis Co. Master Gardener

Now is the ideal time to take cuttings of roses — those roses that you have eye-balling in your friend's yard --- roses that have sentimental value from a loved one's garden --- roses that your neighbor covets and wants to grow in his yard. After all, aren't we taught to share?

You can take cuttings anytime, but fall is best (September till mid-November). To take cuttings you will need:

- a sharp knife or by-pass pruning shears
- rooting hormone such as Rootone
- moistened potting soil composed of 50% aged pine bark, 10% sand, and 40% perlite (Rose society also suggests using African Violet potting mix.)
- small pots if planting individually or larger pots if starting several in one pot

Begin by taking a 6- to 8-inch cutting from the current season's growth when the leaves have matured and the stems have just hardened. Choose stems that are just under the diameter of a pencil. Cuttings with three leaf sets left at the top are ideal. Place the cuttings in water immediately, and put them in a plastic foam cooler to prevent heat damage or drying out until you can plant them.

In preparing the cuttings for planting, cut the bottom of the stem at an angle just below a leaf node. Remove any lower leaflets so the stem cutting will have clean contact with the potting soil. Put some of the rooting hormone in a shallow container, and dip the cut end of each cutting. Tap it lightly to remove any excess. Use a pencil or stick to make holes in the moistened potting mix before placing the cutting into the hole. Gently firm the potting mix around each cutting and water well.

Keep the humidity high by putting clear or semi-clear plastic bags over the pots. Use small stakes to keep plastic from touching the cuttings. (Making an arch with an old clothing hanger works well). Set the planted cuttings in a location where they will receive bright, indirect light and keep them consistently moist.

One indication of successful rooting is the emergence of new growth on the tips. After substantial new growth, you may remove the bag and start fertilizing with a diluted 20-20-20 water soluble fertilizer. Place them in larger containers or outdoor beds when rooted.

Roses generally take 6 to 10 weeks to root. Rooted cuttings will often bloom the first season and usually become landscape-size specimens in their second or third year.

Don't forget!! Waxahachie Downtown Farmer's Market



Saturday, May 22 through October 16

Hours: 8:00 a.m. thru 1:00 pm.

Visit the Ellis Co. Master Gardener's booth

Free handouts ♦ Help with gardening questions
2010 Gardening Calendar ♦ Master Gardener Cookbooks
plus many more items of interest.



Save The Date!
Saturday, March 26, 2011

It's September - What Else Needs to be Done?

By Nancy Fenton, Ellis County Master Gardener



EarthKind™

Our plant experts at Texas A&M have been working for some time on making things grow with less and less water. They have developed a landscaping system they have labeled EarthKind™ that requires no fertilizer and no extra water other than natural rainfall after the first year. It's really not a difficult plan to follow and the savings can really add up. Planning the areas you want to use as well as choosing the plants that have strong genes are two important components of the system as well as the addition of 3-inches of mulch to insulate and hold water.

The first step: **planning**; is a vital part of getting things to grow. Knowing how much sun an area gets as well as where you want to put walks and where the water naturally flows are all important to plant growth. You can check on the amount of sun by observation or do like I did and buy a sun meter that you put out in the morning and look at that night. It will tell you how many hours of full sun you get and if that particular area is considered full or partial sun or shady.

The second step is to check your **drainage**. If your area is near a downspout from your roof it may hold water. This is great for moisture-loving plants but quick death for some of our natives. Of course being in the middle of a path for dogs or children doesn't do much for longevity either. The easiest way for me is to sit down with a pencil with a good eraser and paper. Working out in the yard with a long hose to be the "outline" works too. The key is to get it firmly fixed in you head what will work for your yard. Once all this is in mind you are ready to begin thinking about plants.

Plants are always a question in any of our landscapes. Just because our local nursery or retailer has them doesn't mean that they will grow well in our local alkaline soils. There is a new tool out on the internet through Texas A&M website called EK Plant Selector that will give you a list of plants adapted to conditions in your zip code. You input information on what you want as to size, amount of sun, if you want it to bloom and when, then sit back and watch the pictures come up. You not only get a visual but can further refine it to water requirements! It may take some looking around to find some of these plants, but they are there and they have been tested in areas similar to ours!

The third step is **soil preparation**. Basically, it is the addition of 3-inches of expanded shale and 3-inches of sifted compost tilled into the soil. The shale helps aerate the soil and provides more pore space for the water and roots to do their thing. The compost gives the plants an immediate boost plus contributes the active ingredients to the soil that help the plant roots absorb the nutrients they need. We're talking about new beds and new plantings here, but in established beds, shale can be gently worked in as well as compost.

If you've tilled in the compost and the expanded shale, the bed should be several inches higher than the surrounding area; that's good! Plants can go into the ground at the top of this "mound" of dirt and not have to worry about drowning. It will settle, but you still want the plants not to be buried too deeply. The final step is the addition of three inches of mulch over all the bare ground. Mulch will protect the plant from the stress of extreme heat and cold as well as slow down evaporation of water from the soil.

I prefer coarse mulch so rains can penetrate easily. I have always thought it had to be aged or composted, but when I attended a seminar this fall I learned that 5-year studies have shown that freshly chipped limbs are used just as effectively as my year old mulch. Which ever is used it breaks down and provides fertilizer for the plants as they grow. It is important that you don't remove the old mulch but just keep adding it on top keeping the depth of the mulch at about 3 inches. It does its thing and continues to enrich the soil and hold the water.

If you can't wait to finish your new bed using Earth Kind techniques, check out the Aggie horticulture website at: <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/earthkind> or call the Ellis County Extension office at 972-825-5175, Monday through Friday 8:30-5:00. Master Gardeners would love to visit with you about ways to make things bloom! They stock materials on plants for almost every need including lists of native plants that are not all grasses. The Master Gardeners will return your call and/or send out materials on plants adapted for our area.

A Useful Link for your plant questions:

TexasA&M Plant Disease Handbook

<http://165.91.154.132/TEXLAB/Index.htm>



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