

This newsletter is written by ECMG volunteers and is published bi-monthly in a digital format in January, March, May, July, September and November (odd months). For questions or submissions please email: ellisTXMGnews@gmail.com.



2026 LAWN & GARDEN EXPO

Quarter Century of Learning and Growing

Saturday, March 28, 2026

9:00am - 4:00pm

Waxahachie Civic Center

Waxahachie, TX 75165

Free advanced tickets will be available at our sponsor locations by March 14. (see page 2 for a list of sponsors)

Age 13+ tickets at the door: **\$5.00 CASH**

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The Ellis County Master Gardener Association offers
SCHOLARSHIPS for Ellis County High School
 Seniors with the support of our Sponsors.

Our Expo sponsors make it possible for Ellis County Master Gardeners to offer scholarships of up to \$3,000 annually to Ellis County High School Seniors who plan to attend a Texas College or University to obtain a degree with a major in horticulture or agriculture.

Please support our Sponsors and thank them for their generosity.

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 Waxahachie Senior Activity Center
 Waxahachie Daily Light
 Waxahachie Sun

**THIS YEARS
 APPLICATION MUST
 BE RECEIVED BY
 MARCH 13, 2026**



Download Application



Ellis County

PRODUCE AND PESTICIDES: WHAT'S EATING YOU?

by Beth Norris , ECMG



I was recently in a debate with a friend over whether to wash grapes before eating them. Besides the germs from other people handling them before I bring them home, I felt washing them before eating would, hopefully, remove residual pesticides that could be harmful to my body and the bodies of those I love. My friend stated she didn't think there was any risk from harmful pesticides. So, I decided to investigate this a little further.

There are three organizations that monitor all produce in the United States (or imported from other countries) for pesticides. Those three organizations are: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Here is a breakdown of what each of these organizations do:

- EPA: Sets tolerances, which are the maximum amount of any pesticide allowed to remain in or on a food, as part of the process of regulating pesticides. Tolerances in some countries are referred to as maximum residue limits (MRLs).
- USDA and FDA: These organizations are responsible for enforcing these tolerances. If any pesticide residue is found above the established limits, the affected food products may be seized or be subject to other enforcement actions.

I discovered that there are allowable limits or tolerances of pesticides on our foods and, overall, most of our produce items fall within the safety limits of those guidelines. The USDA reports these findings annually:

- Over 99% of produce samples have residues below EPA safety limits
- 25-30% have no detectable residues at all
- When residues exist, they are typically 100-1,000 times lower than the EPA limit
- Foods for children (applesauce, baby carrots, juices) consistently test safe.

Then, I learned there is a myth going around that stated the number on a produce item related to how clean their growing process was. The fact is there is no U.S. agency that uses letters on produce to indicate pesticide use, residue levels or safety. What is regulated are the pesticide limits with large safety margins by the

EPA; produce testing to ensure pesticide residues stay far below those limits by the USDA; and enforced compliance of grocery stores and imports by the FDA.

What is not regulated: No letters on produce; no color codes; no symbols indicating pesticide danger; and no “secret code” for pesticides. Where this myth seems to be coming from is social media posts that confuse PLU codes with pesticide labeling rules. In addition to this is the misinterpretation of organic versus conventional labeling and viral graphics claiming letters mean toxic, which does not match any U.S. regulation. When a letter is seen on a produce sticker, it is part of a brand logo, inventory system or variety name and is not a pesticide warning. These codes help stores ring up produce correctly and that is all.

My next question was where does organically grown produce fall within all these facts. Organic produce is reported to still be at risk for residual pesticides from natural pesticides or from environmental drift of pesticides. Environmental drift of pesticides means pesticides that travel beyond the field where they were sprayed and land somewhere else because of wind or air movement. However, these trace residues are considered to be very low and still fall within the EPA standards.

Since there is still a slight risk (even for organically grown produce) for pesticides to remain on our produce, I wanted to find out what is the best way to remove that risk from our produce. Not to be left out of the “myth” category, here are the myths I found related to cleaning residual pesticides from our produce.

Myth 1: You need special produce wash to remove pesticides.

Fact: Research from multiple universities have reported that produce washes are not any better than plain water for removing residues or microbes.

Myth 2: Dish detergents or soaps clean produce better.

Fact: Soaps are not considered to be “food safe” and can leave residues you don’t want to ingest. Remember that produce is porous and, therefore, can absorb soap.

Myth 3: A quick water rinse is all you need to remove residual pesticides and microbes. **Fact:** It is recommended to rinse firm produce for 20-30 seconds while rubbing the surface to remove more dirt, microbes and residues.

Myth 4: A solution of vinegar and water removes pesticides.

Fact: While vinegar helps to remove microbes, it is only moderately more effective for pesticide removal. It is fine to use, but isn’t actually better than water for most produce.



Myth 5: Washing with baking soda is pointless.

Fact: A baking soda soak is a very effective home method to remove pesticides from produce. Studies have shown that a solution of 1 teaspoon of baking soda in 2 cups of water and soaking for 12-15 minutes can be more effective at removing surface residues from apples and similar products.

Myth 6: Organically grown produce doesn't need washing.

Fact: Organic produce can still carry dirt, microbes and natural pesticide residues. Washing is always recommended for all produce regardless of how it was grown.

Myth 7: It is unnecessary to peel if you wash well enough.

Fact: While peeling removes nearly all surface residues, it also removes fiber and nutrients. Consider peeling to be an option but not a requirement.

Myth 8: Washing produce in bleach water is a good method to remove pesticides and microbes.

Fact: You should never use bleach on produce, even if diluted with water. The bottom line is that bleach is not safe for direct contact with food and can cause illness.

Here is a list of what does work and is safe:

- 1) Rinse produce under running water
- 2) Rub or brush firm produce, if possible
- 3) Dry with a clean towel
- 4) Peel, if so desired
- 5) Use a baking soda soak for apples, cucumbers, potatoes, etc.



So, where does this leave me in the debate with my friend? I will still argue that all my fresh produce will need at least a good rinse under running water, but I don't think I'll buy any commercial produce washes. I also believe it is up to all consumers to do their own research on this topic. My research findings here are just the tip of the iceberg of what is out on the internet regarding the concerns of pesticides on our produce. I strongly encourage anyone who is interested in this topic to go online and research to your heart's content. If you do so, I hope you find it as interesting as I have!

Source:

US Environmental Protection Agency. (Jan. 6, 2026). Regulation of Pesticide Residues on Food. <https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-tolerances>



The passionflower is an excellent perennial vine for vertical gardens and blooms throughout the summer and on to the first frost.

Looking up to Vertical Gardens

by Teresa Brown, ECMG

When space is a premium, look up to vertical gardens. Vertical gardens can be an easy solution to space problems. Instead of the garden spreading horizontally on the ground, it grows upward on support panels. And it's equally perfect in an ample yard or garden as it is in a space-limited patio container.

Vertical gardens have several advantages. Foremost, they are space-savers. They do not take up as much ground space, which is a prized in urban areas. For example, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension recommends that vine crops are planted "two seeds in a group, 4 feet apart in rows about 8 feet apart." Vertical gardening allows them to be planted a bit closer, about 2-3 feet apart. This means other plants can make use of the ground space. They are also easier on the knees. Crops are produced at eye level are easier to harvest. Aesthetically, the vertical growth creates dimension and

visual interest. As a bonus, they can be easily used to create borders, privacy walls and be the focal point.

However, there are some drawbacks that cannot be ignored. Getting started will have a price tag attached to it. Most vertical gardening requires some kind of framework, such as a trellis, wire panel or cage. If situated against structures, there is a risk of moisture being retained, which can lead to mold or discoloration. Just as they can create privacy, they can also block the sunlight. This can be a disadvantage or advantage, depending on the need. Maintenance costs may also increase. Vertical gardens might need more water and fertilizer because the plants are more exposed to the sun and wind. And they may require more pruning to control the growth.

With that said, let's move on to getting started. Some type of frame is needed for the plants to grow on. Trellises are the easiest choice. They can be placed in new or existing beds, in containers or alongside a wall or fence. They can be arranged to create separate areas like a private sitting spot or in a central location as a focal point.

Arched trellises are lovely as a standalone feature or in raised beds. If used in a raised bed, place each side of the arch in the end of beds to act as a bridge joining

one bed to the other. Not only does this configuration become a lovely walking pass-through, but the trellis also serves double duty by supporting plants in each plot. However, do not put an arched trellis over the center of one bed because it will hog the sunshine and shade the plants under it.



Pumpkin and squash grow well on a heavy duty wire panel.

An obelisk-type trellis is a lovely stand alone. It can be a decorative trellis tower in the yard, or a humble wire tomato cage secured in a pretty container on a patio. Either one can be a centerpiece with the right plant.

The flat panel trellis is a terrific choice to create a privacy screen for a patio or yard. These trellises can be positioned in the yard adjacent to a fence or outdoor sitting area. Unlike the arched version, they can be placed in the center of a garden plot, allowing plants from both sides of it to access the vertical support.

With the Ellis County Master Gardener Expo coming up on March 28, there is an opportunity to find ideal plants for the vertical garden. Look for (or ask for assistance to find) any that climb or can be trained to climb (by tying new growth to the frame). Also if it's fruit bearing, keep the mature fruit size in mind. Extra support may be necessary. Some good plants options include raspberries, blackberries, grapes, and passionfruit. Ideal vegetables include pole beans, cucumbers, tomatoes, sugar snap peas, fava beans, zucchini, butternut squash, spaghetti squash and luffa gourds. Trainable plants include mint (use a container for them to keep them from uncontrolled spreading), lemon verbena, thyme and nasturtium. And for color, look for flowering vines like honeysuckle, crossvine, passionvine, Carolina jessamine and trumpet creeper. But avoid tuber plants, like potatoes, carrots, onions and garlic.

Sink the trellis at least a foot into the ground to provide substantial support. If heavy fruit-bearing plants are the goal, additional anchor stakes may be necessary. When planting, leave some breathing room between the plant and the trellis. That bit of room will be appreciated when the plants are mature. Water and fertilize as directed for specific plants. Check on them weekly during growing season. Tie growth, if necessary, to the trellis and trim away any excess growth that will not produce fruit or is damaged.

For more in depth reading about the pros and cons as well as different vertical designs, look at the 2022 Australian study "Vertical Greening Systems: A Critical

Comparison of Do-It-Yourself Designs.”

Sources:

Dominici, L; Comino, E; Torpy, F. & Irga, P. (25 Nov 2022). Vertical Greening Systems: A Critical Comparison of Do-It-Yourself Designs.

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9739368/#sec5-plants-11-03230>

Gardenary (Aug. 7, 2025). The complete guide to vertical gardening.

<https://www.gardenary.com/blog/the-complete-guide-to-vertical-gardening>

Petal Back Farm. How to grow squash on a trellis.

<https://petalbackfarm.com/how-to-grow-squash-on-a-trellis>

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension. Vegetable Resources. Spaghetti Squash.

<https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/vegetable/guides/specialty-vegetables/spaghetti-squash>

Photos

File name: passion flower
Photo credit: T. Brown

File name: Pumpkin wall petal back farm
Photo credit: Petal Back Farm

A YEAR IN REVIEW ANSWER KEY

J	F	T	R	G	E	T	Y	O	U	R	E	E	R	C
M	A	E	S	E	G	C	A	L	E	N	N	D	A	A
Y	R	N	B	U	B	T	O	D	A	U	Y	E	E	W
A	X	J	U	R	G	M	A	B	J	X	K	E	Y	Q
D	O	G	R	A	U	U	E	B	J	R	N	E	W	R
G	H	P	M	L	R	A	A	T	S	Y	Z	F	E	E
G	J	C	I	F	B	Y	R	O	P	Z	A	B	E	N
J	M	A	R	F	X	Y	L	Y	L	E	O	F	O	K
Y	U	D	E	C	E	M	B	E	R	T	S	V	E	T
F	S	L	P	O	Q	Z	G	X	C	O	E	E	F	K
X	E	W	Y	E	L	P	B	O	Q	M	W	N	N	O
N	Q	E	H	U	I	C	A	S	B	H	T	N	O	M
H	C	R	A	M	R	V	J	E	Y	P	M	T	L	N
S	W	O	Y	R	P	S	R	C	E	W	G	A	P	M
N	N	V	I	L	A	O	R	N	M	B	N	Q	Y	I

by Paul Thomas, ECMG

HOW I GOT A WINTER GARDEN THROUGH THE FREEZE

I had planted a winter garden January 2, the day the onion transplants arrived from a Texas farm. In addition to the onions, I planted lettuce, snap peas, and radishes. There were also two veggie plants wintering over. They were veterans of two winters, a Brussels sprout and a kale. So, the January freeze came. Here is how I prepared these plants for cold weather.

Preparation: For an 8 x 4 foot row, I had hoops, frost cloth, and clips on hand. I find I need two packages that together are advertised [1.1][2.1][3.1][4.1]. Also, in my case I had a second cover in the form of a twin fitted sheet.

To set up the row cover:

1. Scrape back the four or so inches of mulch you have previously put down in preparation. The result should be a wave pattern, with soil at the bottom of the valleys.
2. Plant or transplant.
3. Set up the hoops every foot and a half.
4. Is a frosty night or below freezing weather coming?
 - a. Water the garden the day before.
 - b. Clip frost cloth to the hoops. Anchor the ends with bricks or pave stones.
 - c. Clip the sheet to the frost cloth.
 - d. By hand, pull mulch over the plants in the valleys.
5. Wait out the storm. Safety note: buy some clip-on crampons for your shoes, so that you can walk on ice.
6. Above freezing again? Pull off the covers, leaving the hoops (or go half-way to save time, if this is only a temporary reprieve. Pull back the mulch.

Results (in my case): There were three nights of freezing temperatures in late January. The temperature got down to 13 degrees one night. There were several kinds of freezing precipitation at the beginning. Most of it fell as sleet, and I think it bounced off the covering, which was clear of clinging ice or snow when I checked. The surrounding ground had an icepack, but the protected part of the garden was clear.

Results by plant, two weeks post-freeze.

- Protected onions: They loved it! Under the cover they had thrived, showing growth.
- Unprotected onions: They survived. I watered them, and two weeks later, they are about 95% back.
- The radishes had radished, so I harvested about a cup and a half.
- The lettuce also flourished, enough to thin.
- The peas were the most tender. The stems had died back, but two weeks later the plants put on secondary stems.
- Unprotected kale and Brussels sprouts, they both survived. We just cut off any foliage that had turned white.

Conclusion: this took minimal time and not much cost. You can single-hand it during set up, but two people can do it a lot quicker.

Pictures:

What I got from Amazon: Two boxes containing light green clips, hoop pieces, connectors that are in the plastic bag. You connect the hoop pieces with the connectors, put up the freeze cloth, plastic sheets, etc. and clip with the light green clips.

Amazon: Search “garden hoops” and “plant covers” or “row covers.” Total outlay in 2026: about \$30, assuming you can spare an old twin size fitted sheet.



The fitted sheet was fitted over the freeze cloth. Note the kale plant which I didn't protect from the freeze. It survived, anyway. This photo was taken in the afternoon before the freeze.



Lettuce seedlings above. Frost damaged edible pod sugar peas struggling in the foreground.

These onions were protected. They didn't lose a beat. In fact, they thrived through the freeze.



These onions were not protected. Most survived, even the tiny ones, though some had only a quarter inch of green left on the stem. If you order onions, they arrive the first week of January, with the expectation that you will plant them right away,

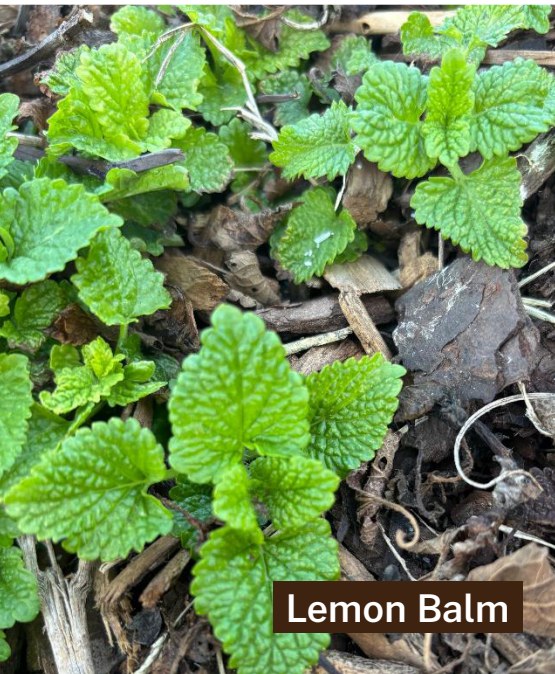


Rose



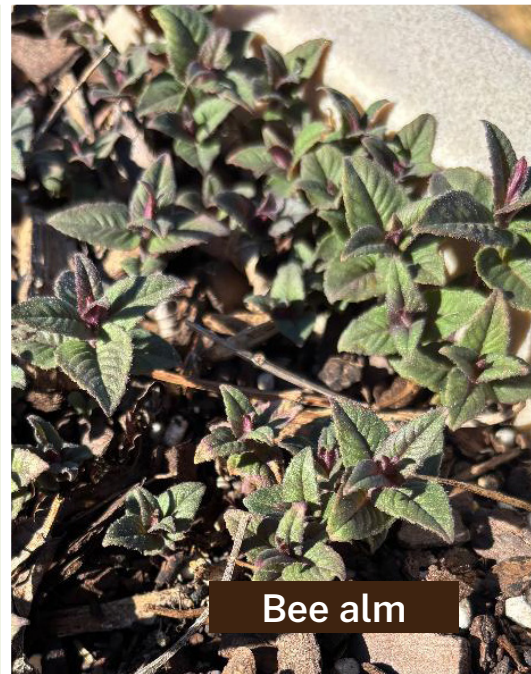
Photos by Malcolm Avaritt, ECMG

Autumn Joy



Lemon Balm

As the ECMGA is getting ready for EXPO so are the plants. Don't be a late bloomer or miss out on the great plant selections available this year on March 28th at the Waxahachie Civic Center



Bee alm



Daylilly



Fennel

SAVE NATIVE PLANTS AND ANIMALS! WHAT CAN YOU DO AS AN INDIVIDUAL?

by Rob Franks, ECMG

In an earlier newsletter I wrote an article about the Blackland Prairie, which runs through North Texas in the DFW Metroplex from Sherman through Waxahachie. In the early 1800s, it was covered by tall native grasses, beautiful flowers, bushes and trees. It looked like heaven to pioneering farmers and ranchers. Yes, even bison were grazing here. So what happened? It was all plowed under in a very short time and nonnative grasses, crops and ornamentals were brought in to replace what was here. And the animals? They either moved away, starved to death or could not find a place to raise their young and disappeared into extinction. So much for biodiversity.

The nonnatives found the Texas climate for extreme heat, extreme cold and long droughts hard to tolerate, which resulted in a constant battle for people who wanted things the way they were back home. The natives had adapted over thousands of years without human intervention and had found ways to exist regardless of the Texas climate.

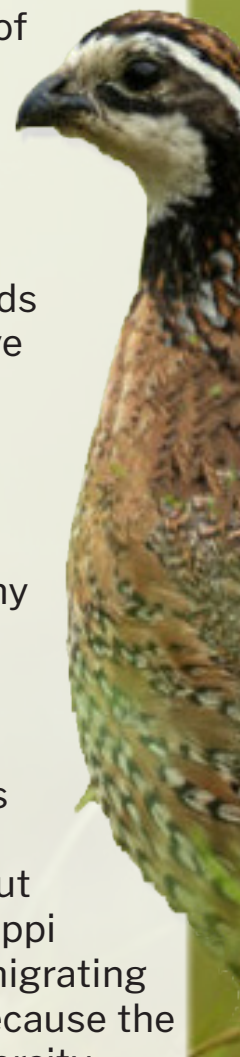
I hear people all the time complaining that their flowers, trees and grasses require so much work, water, fertilizer and pesticides just stay alive, and it is expensive. When was the last time you saw fireflies?

The answer is to plant NATIVE PLANTS, encouraging native insects and birds to return and not using so many pesticides and weed killers, because native plants do not need them. Texas, now, has a law that requires homeowner associations to allow residents to landscape with native plants to conserve water.

I have had the pleasure to see many birds and butterflies visiting my strip of Blackland Prairie in my backyard. I also use native shrubs and trees in my front yard that replaced the Bradford pear trees and boxwood shrubs.

Now, the movement to increase biodiversity with native plants for native animals has gone national with Homegrown National Parks, where each landowner can create a piece of land on their property that, as a whole, has the potential to double the area that we have currently in national parks, national rangelands and other protected lands. Yes, we have great parks, but 71% of the land in the lower states is privately owned. East of the Mississippi river, over 85% of land is privately owned. This makes it very difficult for migrating birds and decreases the genetic diversity, which can result in extinction because the parks, while large, are not close enough to each other to affect genetic diversity.

Municipalities and public areas can switch to natives as well as residents and ranchers. The Texas highway department not only seeds highway right-of-ways with native plants but does not mow until the plants have stopped blooming and produced seed for future growth.

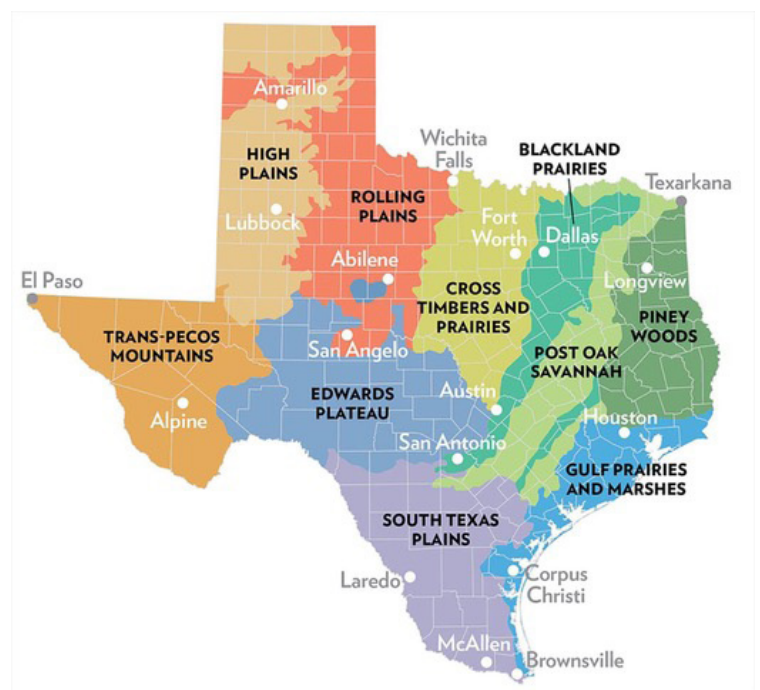
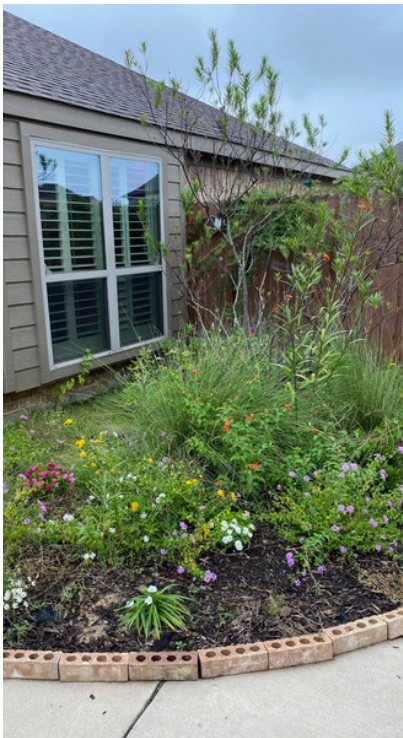


What can you do as an individual?

1. Shrink the lawn and use native grasses. You will be pleased with a lower water bill.
2. Remove invasive species. Yes, Bermuda and Saint Augustine grasses are invasive, but those dandelions that are called “weeds” are native and provide food for bees and butterflies in the spring before other plants begin to flower.
3. Be generous with your native planting.
4. Reduce your nighttime light pollution or at least replace them with yellow LED bulbs.
5. Provide areas for frogs, toads and insects to hide and breed.
6. Leave the leaves that fall in your yard at least until April. Many insects like lightning bugs over winter in them.
7. Leave water out for birds and provide wet sand for butterflies.
8. Provide more feed plants for caterpillars
9. Set your lawnmower at no less than 3 inches. Remember that most native bees are ground dwellers.
10. Stop random spraying of pesticides and herbicides that are nonspecific. With native plants and grasses you do not need someone to treat your yard. This includes broad area neighborhood mosquito spraying.

Look up Home Grown National Park to see more about what they are proposing. Research how to create a “pocket prairie.” Watch for announcements about where Master Gardeners will be speaking in your area in libraries, farmer markets and garden clubs. Come to the Master Gardener Plant Expo at the Waxahachie Civic Center on March 28 to learn more and possibly pick up some native plants with your veggies.

Let us work together to restore the natural biodiversity and Happy Gardening.



A YEAR IN REVIEW

This puzzle is a word search puzzle that has a hidden message in it.

J	F	T	R	G	E	T	Y	O	U	R	E	E	R	C
M	A	E	S	E	G	C	A	L	E	N	N	D	A	A
Y	R	N	B	U	B	T	O	D	A	U	Y	E	E	W
A	X	J	U	R	G	M	A	B	J	X	K	E	Y	Q
D	O	G	R	A	U	U	E	B	J	R	N	E	W	R
G	H	P	M	L	R	A	A	T	S	Y	Z	F	E	E
G	J	C	I	F	B	Y	R	O	P	Z	A	B	E	N
J	M	A	R	F	X	Y	L	Y	L	E	O	F	O	K
Y	U	D	E	C	E	M	B	E	R	T	S	V	E	T
F	S	L	P	O	Q	Z	G	X	C	O	E	E	F	K
X	E	W	Y	E	L	P	B	O	Q	M	W	N	N	O
N	Q	E	H	U	I	C	A	S	B	H	T	N	O	M
H	C	R	A	M	R	V	J	E	Y	P	M	T	L	N
S	W	O	Y	R	P	S	R	C	E	W	G	A	P	M
N	N	V	I	L	A	O	R	N	M	B	N	Q	Y	I

- | | | |
|----------|-----------|----------|
| April | August | Day |
| December | February | January |
| July | June | March |
| May | Month | November |
| October | September | Week |
| Year | | |

Answer on page 8

First find all the words in the list. Words can go in any direction and share letters as well as cross over each other. Once you find all the words, copy the unused letters starting in the top left corner into the blanks to reveal the hidden message.
