



# E-Gardening Newsletter

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## “Wildflowers of Texas”

The 17<sup>th</sup> annual Ellis County Master Gardener’s 2023 Gardening Calendar is now available at our sponsors’ locations. The new calendars have articles on Texas’ Most Notable Wildflower– The Bluebonnet, How to Incorporate Wildflowers into Your Garden, Creating a Butterfly Waystation, Protecting and Promoting Our Wildflowers and Bluebonnets on Display in Ellis County. Each month has information on a specific wildflower as well as other gardening information for that month.



### Pick up your copy at our sponsors now!

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## PLANTING

Plant berry-producing trees and shrubs to add winter color to your landscape. Choices include possumhaw and yaupon holly, Caroline buckthorn, rusty blackhaw viburnum, and American beauty-berry.

Plant pre-chilled tulip and hyacinth bulbs mid to late month. Plant bulbs in masses for best effect.

Daffodil bulbs may still be planted. Look for early and small-flowering varieties that tend to naturalize and return yearly.



Considering a living Christmas tree? Choose an adapted plant. Junipers, Arizona cypress and pyramidal hollies are good options. While indoors, place the tree in the brightest natural light and keep soil moist. Do not leave indoors for more than two weeks.

## FERTILIZING AND PRUNING

Apply a root stimulator such as liquid seaweed or a high-phosphorus fertilizer to newly planted trees and shrubs.

Do not top crape myrtles or remove the central leader of any shade tree. It destroys the crape myrtle's natural shape, and delays blooming by five or six weeks. If your plant is too tall or too wide, remove or relocate it, and replace with something smaller that will not require trimming.

Remove mistletoe from trees as soon as it becomes visible. Use a pole pruner to remove the entire twig from infected branches before the mistletoe produces berries. There are no effective consumer products to control this parasitic plant.

## GARDEN WATCH

Protect tender vegetation from the cold with a lightweight frost cloth available at most nurseries and garden centers.

Continue to water lawns, newly planted trees, shrubs and perennials if rainfall is insufficient.

Prepare garden soil for spring planting by tilling in six inches of organic matter (compost) to a depth of eight to ten inches.

Take time during the holidays to check out the new seed and nursery catalogues. Order early to ensure availability.

Let's not forget our feathered friends during the winter when their natural food supply is limited. Providing sunflower, safflower and thistle seed, suet and fruit will attract many species of birds to your backyard. And be sure to provide water.



## WELCOME MASTER GARDENER INTERNS

Sixteen Ellis County Master Gardener students recently completed their class work and are now Master Gardener Interns. During the coming year, they will complete volunteer hours helping out in a variety of Master Gardener projects. Here MG Intern Beth Norris writes about her experiences so far as she anticipates what the new year holds.



I have just finished my 10 weeks of in classroom instruction to become an intern with the Ellis County Master Gardeners!! I have also completed and passed my final exams!! So, what's next? Well, first I will reflect back on the amazing course instructors from A&M and the A&M Agrilfe County Extension staff. I felt like I should have received a few college credits for all the outstanding course work I was privileged to experience. And I don't want to overlook the incredible Master Gardener Handbook-or as I will now refer to it as-my MG bible!

There are so many highlights from this experience. I was able to sit in a classroom of other adult professionals who share a passion for gardening and the desire to share with each other and the community all that we have learned and are still learning. Everyone I met came to the class with some level of gardening prowess. I learned so much from each other's shared experiences with their own home gardens-success stories, insect/weed horror stories, and where to find the best selection of specialty plants to name a few. Even though we are all mostly from Ellis, county, the gardening experiences and garden situations are as varied as the different types of tomato seed we can plant!

I am already looking forward to the many volunteer opportunities in store for us. While this is the slower time of year, what with Thanksgiving just past and Christmas upon us, I know there will be some opportunities I can look forward to in the very near future.

I am so excited to have been able to finally fulfill a long-time dream of becoming a ECMG, and can't wait to meet other fellow gardening enthusiasts at upcoming volunteer events!

If you know of anyone who is playing with the idea of becoming an ECMG, let them know it's well worth the time and small effort it takes to get to intern status.

Beth Norris/ECMG Intern Fall 2022

# Poinsettias

## (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*)



Sharon McIver – Ellis County Master Gardener



Deck the halls and spread good cheer because Christmas time is here! Garden centers and retail stores are filling display shelves with colorful poinsettias. Who doesn't like to see these bright red, white or pink beauties during the holidays? Each year, Texas ranks high in the nation for poinsettia production and sales. These colorful plants are also a popular Christmas fundraiser item.

The poinsettia is a native plant of Mexico that was likely introduced to that area by the Aztecs who called the plant Cuetlaxochitl. The colorful bracts were used to make various shades of dyes and the milky plant sap was used to treat fever. The plant was brought to Greenville, South Carolina by Joel Robert Poinsett who was appointed the first United States Ambassador to Mexico (1825-1829). He was quite taken by the beauty

of the bright red plants during a visit to Taxco, a city in Guerrero, and had some of them sent to his Greenville plantation as additions to his greenhouse. In 1833, a German taxonomist gave the plant its botanical name (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*). The common name "poinsettia" is a tribute to former Ambassador Poinsett.

The Texas native poinsettia (*Euphorbia cyathophora*) is commonly named Fire on the Mountain. It is a small, spreading plant with reddish-orange color bracts that will commonly grow to a height of between 18 and 24 inches, though it can grow taller in shady areas. Another variety found in Texas is Snow-on-the Mountain (*Euphorbia marginata*). This cream-silver-green plant has leaves margined in silver, and cream-colored inflorescences. It grows 3-4 feet in height and is very tough and drought resistant. These annuals will bloom from late summer through early fall and will return the next year from their seeds that spread by a process known as seed clumping.

Poinsettias perform well when exposed to at least six hours of indirect sunlight. Daytime temperatures of no greater than 70°C of moist air free from drafts will help prolong bract color while indoors. Soil should be kept moderately moist. Avoid root rot by not allowing the plant to stand in water. Do not fertilize the plant while in bloom.

If you want to plant your poinsettia outside, do so when the danger of frost and freeze have passed and night temperatures average 55°F or above. Protect your outside plants from wind and cold rain. Poinsettias perform best when planted outside in pots, though native plants can be found growing in pastures and other rural areas in Texas.

Poinsettias begin to bud and produce flowers as autumn nights get longer. Expect full bloom around late November or December. These plants are very particular regarding exposure to light, especially during the flowering season when they like about 14 hours of total and continuous darkness followed by 6-8 hours of bright sunlight beginning in October to encourage bloom.

For additional information, visit <https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/ornamental/the-texas-poinsettia-producers-guide/>.

### References:

1. Joran, Richard. Iowa State University Extension and Outreach: Horticulture and Home Pest News.
2. Welch, Dr. William C., Landscape Horticulturist, Texas Cooperative Extension. Horticulture Update: Poinsettias Nov-Dec. 2005 ed.
3. <https://www.centraltexasgardener.org/resource/texas-poinsettia>



Red

White

Ice Crystals

Jingle Bells

Pink



# MY FAVORITE TOOL

Kim Rainey, ECMG

## Maureen Nitkowski, Ellis County Master Gardener

**“hori” means  
dig in Japanese**

A hori-hori is a Japanese soil knife. Maureen calls it her bayonet. She says her husband calls it her “dig-dig”.

Hori-hori knives are generally between 11 and 15 inches long, with handles made from many different materials. Maureen's is nylon. She prefers that style because of its durability and the bright color makes it easier to keep track of in the garden.

The knife is great for weeding and planting. The serrated edge, though not razor sharp, will saw through roots.

Maureen has been an Ellis County Master Gardener for 20 years. She joined ECMGA because she is a Texas transplant (like many of us!) and she quickly realized she would need to learn the peculiarities of keeping plants alive in North Central Texas. She certainly has applied what she has learned, her property is full of fruit trees and unusual specimens which she freely shares with fellow members.



# Wildflower of the Month

## **Cowpen Daisy – Sunflower Family (Asteraceae)**

*Verbesina encelioides* Gav.) Benth. & Hook.

**Region:** 2 – 10 (Ellis County is in Region 4)

**Size:** 1 – 4 feet

**Blooms:** February – December, Annual



Melinda Kocian, ECMG



Yellow, daisy-like flower heads with prominent, yellow-orange centers top the slender stems of this bush composite. A covering of hair gives the stems and foliage a blue-green or gray-green appearance. Flowers vary in size to two and one-half inches across, and there are three deeply cut teeth at the tips of each of the twelve to sixteen petals. Thick leaves are shaped like arrowheads, coarsely toothed on the edges and prominently veined on the underside. A Spanish name, *anil del muerto*, meaning “sunflower of the dead,” was given to this plant because of its strong, unpleasant odor when crushed. A salve made from cowpen daisy has been used as an anti-inflammatory agent; cowpen tea is said to relieve an early peptic ulcer and some believe it may break a fever by inducing sweating relaxation. Its seeds have a high oil content.

**MARK**  
*your*  
**CALENDAR**  
UPCOMING EVENTS

**Ellis County  
Master  
Gardeners  
EXPO**

**March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2023**

*Go Wild with Wildflowers!*

Featuring keynote speakers:

**John Thomas,**

*Owner & founder of Wildseed Farms in Fredericksburg*

**Andrea DeLong-Amaya,**

*Director of Horticulture from LBJ Wildflower Center in Austin*



# SEED SAVING

Marj McClung, Master Gardener

As I was checking out my garden in between rainy days, I noticed my Datura's (Angel's Trumpet) prickly seed pods had opened, spilling seeds onto the wet ground. The plant is in a pot and the ground around is NOT where I want future Daturas. I quickly grabbed the shears to harvest the seeds for my sister and one of my front flower beds. Then I went on a seed hunt to see what other plants had given up on me and were planting themselves.

Saving seeds is not always practical or effective. Commercially grown seeds are available in many varieties. Seeds from hybrid plants will show characteristics of the pollinator plants as well as the seed bearer and may produce a very different plant. And many seeds are sterile. But for some plants, especially those passed along whose name I do not know and varieties that have fallen out of favor and aren't readily available anymore, saving seed is the way to keep these in my garden.

## To save seed:

- Collect seed and/or seed pods that have dried on the plant. This ensures that the seeds are mature and ready. This works unless it has rained for two weeks and the seed pod, though still green, has opened like my Datura.
- Collect in envelopes or paper bags and leave to dry. Make sure there is good air flow so seeds dry and don't mold.
- When dry, store in paper in a cool, dry place. You can store in plastic baggies, baby food jars or pill bottles, but to avoid moisture, I add a desiccant such as silica gel. These are the little packs marked "Do Not Eat" found in vitamins and some packages. (Yes, I save everything.) Store away from light to prevent sprouting.
- LABEL!!! Not shown in the picture are the rust-colored seeds I have in an old pill bottle. I have no clue as to what they are.

Saving vegetable seed is more of a challenge since many vegetables cross-pollinate. Also, some vegetable seeds are patented. Some vegetables must be left to mature past the best ripeness for eating if you want to save seed. For information on saving vegetable seed, check these sites:

<http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/archives/parsons/vegetables/SEED.html>

<http://agriflifeextension.tamu.edu/asset-external/overview-of-seed-saving-laws/>

## As to the seeds in the picture:

**Mexican Buckeye** is a tree. The seeds are toxic, but pretty in their pods. These are small native trees.

**Flame Acanthus** (Anisacanthus): This is a perennial flower. I have never tried to grow it from seed and don't have seedlings in that flower bed, so it may be sterile. I picked these because the pods are pretty for the picture.

**Blackberry Lily** (Iris domestica – formerly Belamcanda chinensis): These do grow well from seed and are hard to find, so I save and pot up all my seed.

**Rock Rose** (Pavonia lasiopetala): They produce lots of seed but plants are easy to find.

**Datura** (Datura metel): Easy to grow from seed, this is a common pass-along plant.

**Four O'-Clocks** (Mirabilis jalapa): Highly effective germination. This is a pretty, old-fashioned plant.





## Take Care When Collecting Fall Leaves!

We've taken the kids out to collect leaves and marvel over the colors, sizes and shapes. And as gardeners, we also take note of the prettiest as possible future plantings for our yards. But take care!

*Poison Ivy has lovely foliage, but it's still Poison Ivy!*

## Christmas Cactus

The Christmas cactus is a favorite plant for the holiday season. With a little bit of care, these plants will provide many years of beautiful holiday blooms. Some plants can last over 100 years. There are reports of 200 year-old plants that have been handed down for generations.

Christmas cacti are short-day plants. They will bloom when the days grow shorter (9-10 hours of light) and temperatures grow cooler. They like bright indirect light. A Christmas cactus will have significant buds by late October or early November. Flower buds form best when the plant is kept in temperatures between 50 and 60°F

You can kickstart the budding process by exposing the plant to temperatures of about 45°F (7°C) for several nights in a row. You can also keep the the plant in a dark space for a several days. Withholding water before short days start will stress the plant and may improve bud set.

All the holiday cacti thrive in well-drained potting soil high in organic material. You can add some sand to increase the weight. A good soluble fertilizer, such as 20-20-20, is recommended every two weeks until bud set.

Once your plant has buds, reduce fertilization to about once a month. Water every 2-3 weeks, but only water when the top one third of soil feels dry to the touch. Don't let the plant get bone dry. Over-watering is a major problem for all succulents. Make sure the pot has a good drainage, and that the plant does not sit in water. They really don't like wet feet.



Photo from Almanac.com



Common causes of flower bud drop include:

- Too much water or not enough water
- Exposure to cold drafts or too warm temperatures
- Over-fertilization
- Rough handling

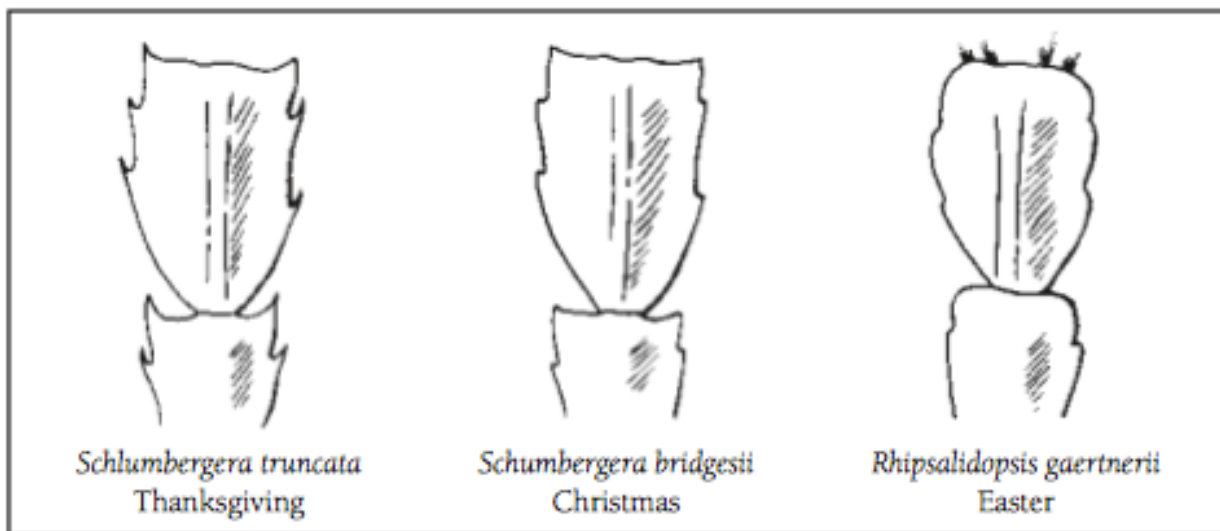
If your cactus sheds its buds one winter, don't worry: it should bloom the following year!

Insects aren't usually a problem. If you see mealy bugs, aphids, and scale wipe away with a cotton swab dipped in alcohol.

Once the flowering season is over, the growing season begins and the plant will produce new vegetative growth. Maintain temperatures of 70-80 degrees for the best growth. They will tolerate temperatures of 90-100 degrees, but growth may be inhibited.

Prune plants in late spring to encourage branching and more flowers. Cut off a few sections of each stem; the plant will branch from the wound. Place the cut pieces in a lightly moist potting soil—they root easily after a few weeks.

### Christmas, Thanksgiving, or Easter cactus?



Credit: [www.extension.iastate.edu](http://www.extension.iastate.edu)

The key to identifying which type of holiday cactus you're looking at is the leaves. Christmas cactus leaves have a tear-drop shape. Thanksgiving cacti leaves have more of a pointed, claw shaped ends on the leaves. Easter cacti are more rounded with little hair-like growths on the ends. Most cacti sold as Christmas cactus are actually the Thanksgiving variety.

Thanksgiving cacti (*Schlumbergera truncata*) bloom from late fall to mid-winter

Christmas cacti (*S. x buckleyi*) bloom from early winter to mid-winter.

Easter cacti (*S. gaertneri*) bloom from later winter to mid-spring.

Sources:

<https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/parsons/search.php?category=Christmas%20cactus>

<https://www.extension.iastate.edu/linn/news/it-thanksgiving-christmas-or-easter-cactus>

<https://www.almanac.com/plant/christmas-cactus>

<https://www.dailypress.com/life/vp-hl-cactus-mascot-021222-20220212-psfxsf7oujchzcsqgsslrkcdge-story.html>