HARRIS COUNTY MASTER GARDENER NEWSLETTER May/June 2026

Urban Dirt

Gardening Events and Information for Harris County

Message from our President

Dianne Lawrence, President
Harris County Master Gardeners

Welcome, Spring!! I am currently in Lynchburg, VA visiting family in my home state. The weather is beautiful and the humidity is low. I left my vegetable and flowers beds in the care of my yard man for watering and harvesting for his own use. I hope your gardens are flourishing in the spring rains, too.

Spring is a time of change and moving forward. We are looking ahead to our new gardens at Spring Creek Park which are coming along very nicely. We also have designated trial beds there and are increasing our presence in the northern part of the county. There is also the anticipation of new agents and staff to manage the Master Gardener Program. We have much to thank David Wright for his work at our expansion. Spring Creek Park is a lovely area and offers much opportunity for growth. Time for all of us to move out of our comfort zones and expand our horizons.

I hope you've been enjoying our free Green Thumb gardening lecture series, presented online through our partnerships with Houston City College (HCC) and Harris County Public Library (HCPL). This month we are learning more about "Intergrative Pest Managment." In June, we'll hear about "Enemies in the Garden." Find more information here.

As always, I hope you enjoy this issue and invite you to visit us on social media and at our website at https://txmg.org/hcmga/ for more information about upcoming events and activities.

Lastly, I've included a few photos of Peonies and Rhododendron from Virginia. The Rhododendron is a 15' tall, 50 year-old plant. Get out and enjoy what's blooming in your garden!

Thank you for supporting Harris County Master Gardeners.

Dianne Lawrence

In This Issue

subscribe HERE

Texas AgriLife Extension Service Horticulture Program in Harris County
13105 Northwest Freeway,
Suite 1000,
Houston, TX 77040
713.274.0950

County Community Engagement Coordinator
coordinator@harriscounty
mastergardeners.org

Master Gardener Volunteer Coordinator
coordinator@harriscounty
mastergardeners.org

Written by Harris County Master Gardeners in cooperation with the Harris County Extension Office of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service is an equal opportunity employer and program provider. Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service provides equal opportunities in its programs and employment to all persons, regardless of race, color, sex. religion, national origin, disability, age, genetic information, veteran status, sexual orientation, or gender identity. The Texas A&M University System, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the County Commissioners Courts of Texas Cooperating. Reference to trade names or commercial products is made with the understanding that no discrimination is intended and no endorsement by Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service is implied.

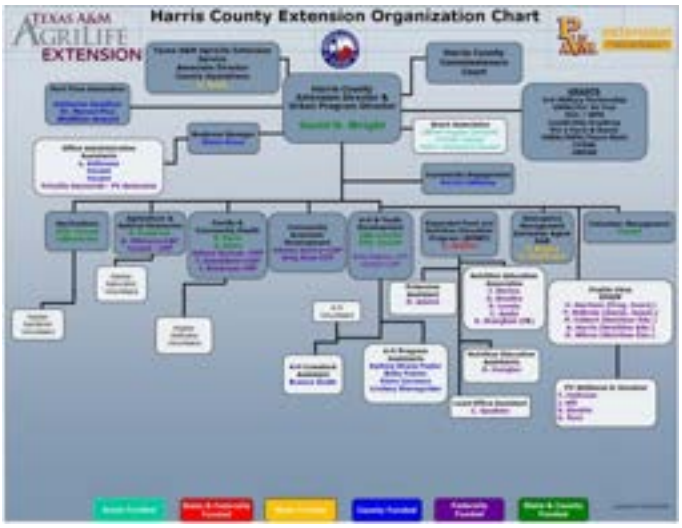
First Tuesday Meetings

For our March 3 meeting, David Wright, Urban Program Director for Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, spoke to us about exciting changes that are happening for our organization. But first, he gave a huge thank you to all of our volunteers for their tireless work throughout our communities.

David shared our current MG Numbers:

•Active Harris County Master Gardeners – 185
•Total Volunteer Hours – 15,563
•Continuing Education Hours – 1,954

And an organization chart:



David stressed how community partnerships help us to understand local needs. By setting up HCMG satellite offices and gardens, we can expand into more communities and bring educational and outreach services to more residents.

These satellite offices and gardens can soon be found at:

- Dennis Johnston Park—garden space and office space;
- Mercer Botanic Garden—office space;
- Houston Food Bank—garden space, greenhouse, office space.

The Houston Food Bank - New Partner HUB will be located at 2121 West Mount Houston Rd. in northwest Houston. It will open in 2028. It will include a greenhouse, gardens, hydroponic garden, classrooms and conference rooms for HCMG and other community partners to use.

Finally, David encouraged us to continue to volunteer, support and collaborate with our current partnerships in our community and continue the great work!

Upcoming First Tuesday Meetings:

May 5
"Hibiscus: Care, Propagation and Hybridization" with Marti and Greg Graves

June 2
"Houston Federation of Garden Clubs: History and Benefits" with Jennifer Hydes, President Houston Federation of Garden Club

July 7
"A Visit to the Chelsea Flower Show" with Valerie Depew, Harris County Master Gardener

August 4
"Mercer Botanic Center: Preserving the Past for the Future" with Kari Hernandez, Curator Mercer Arboretum and Botanic Gardens

Cover photo of Black Swallowtail butterfly on Phlox by Jo Ann Stevenson, Master Gardener. Picture taken at the Houston Botanic Garden.

Back to Table of Contents

First Tuesday Meetings

At our April meeting, we celebrated our volunteers with the annual Awards Banquet. Winners are selected by the Membership committee.

HONORARY LIFE MEMBERSHIP
Mary Stokman

Not shown are Meritorious Award winners Choo-Keeng Eng and Lisa Rawl.

LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD
Nelson Harbinsen

OUTSTANDING VOLUNTEER AWARD
Jo Ann Stevenson

MERITORIOUS SERVICE AWARD
Lucia Hansen

VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR AWARD
Chevvy Tang

MERITORIOUS SERVICE AWARD
Cindy Moore

NEW MASTER GARDENER
Marilyn Lane

Back to Table of Contents

Upcoming EVENTS

Tuesday, May 5, 11 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.
First Tuesday Meeting Lecture: "Hibiscus: Care, Propagation and Hybridization" with Marti and Greg Graves
Click for updates:
https://txmg.org/hcmga/lecture-series/
Trini Mendenhall Community Center
1414 Wirt Rd., Houston, 77055

Saturday, May 9, 12:00 p.m.
Organic Gardening with Mary Gaber
Freed Community Center,
6818 Shadyvilla Ln., Houston 77055

Monday, May 11, 10 – 11:30 a.m.
GREEN THUMB presents:
"Integrative Pest Management" presented by Debra Caldwell.
Learn how to manage pests in a safer, more sustainable way through Integrated Pest Management.
Harris County Master Gardeners
HCC @Home Gardening Series.
Register here:
hcc.idloom.events/gardening-series/register

Monday, May 11, 12:30 p.m.
Organic Gardening with Chevvy Tang
Weekley Community Center
8440 Greenhouse Rd, Cypress 77433

Monday, May 11, 2:00 p.m.
Composting with Teresa See
Harris County Public Library
4400 Bens View Lane, Kingwood 77339

Thursday, May 14, 10:00 a.m.
Texas Superstar Plants with Teresa See
Trini Mendenhall Community Center
1414 Wirt Rd., Houston 77055

Tuesday, May 19, 11 a.m. – 12 p.m.
GREEN THUMB presents:
"Integrative Pest Management" presented by Debra Caldwell.
Learn how to manage pests in a safer, more sustainable way through Integrated Pest Management.
Harris County Master Gardeners
Harris County Public Library on You Tube
No reservation needed
– visit https://bit.ly/4jo8lWa

Tuesday, June 2, 11 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.
First Tuesday Meeting Lecture: "Houston Federation of Garden Clubs: History and Benefits" with Jennifer Hydes, President Houston Federation of Garden Clubs
Click for updates:
ttps://txmg.org/hcmga/lecture-series/
Trini Mendenhall Community Center
1414 Wirt Rd., Houston 77055

Monday, June 8, 10 – 11:30 a.m.
GREEN THUMB presents:
"Enemies in the Garden" by Karen Gerlach.
Learn about health risks that gardeners are exposed to and ways to decrease those risks to make gardening more enjoyable! This will include plant sensitivities, insect and infectious risks, and other safety topics.
Harris County Master Gardeners
HCC @Home Gardening Series.
Register here: hcc.idloom.events/gardening-series/register

Back to Table of Contents

Upcoming EVENTS

Thursday, June 11, 11:00 a.m.
Texas Superstar Plants with Teresa See
Tracy Gee Community Center
3599 Westcenter Dr., Houston 77042

Friday, June 12, 2:00 p.m.
Composting with Teresa See
Freed Community Center
6818 Shadyvilla Ln., Houston 77055

Wednesday, June 17, 10:00 a.m.
Container Gardening with Teresa See
Mendenhall Community Center,
1414 Wirt Rd., Houston 77055

Tuesday, June 16, 11 a.m. – 12 p.m.
GREEN THUMB presents:
"Enemies in the Garden" presented by Karen Gerlach.
Learn about health risks that gardeners are exposed to and ways to decrease those risks to make gardening more enjoyable! This will include plant sensitivities, insect and infectious risks, and other safety topics.
Harris County Master Gardeners
Harris County Public Library on You Tube
No reservation needed–just visit
https://bit.ly/4jo8lWa

Friday, June 19, 11:00 a.m.
Herbs with Chevvy Tang
Steve Radack Community Center
18650 Clay Rd., Houston 77084

Monday, June 22, 1:00 p.m.
Plant Propagation with Teresa See
Bayland Community Center
6400 Bissonnet St., Houston 77074

Thursday, June 25, 12:00 p.m.
Rainwater Harvesting with Teresa See
Glazier Senior Education Center
16600 Pine Forest Ln., Houston 77042

Busy bees at Mercer Arboretum
courtesy of Jo Ann Stevenson

Back to Table of Contents

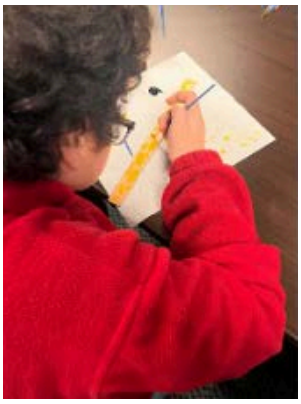
4-H and Youth Development

By Lindsey Stonegraber, 4-H Program Assistant

The 4-H and Youth Development Team is a part of a USDA Grant called Children, Youth, and Families at Risk program (CYFAR). In Harris County, we serve three Harmony Schools to develop and deliver educational programs that equip at-risk youth and families with skills to lead positive, productive lives. We deliver this type of program using the Learn, Grow, Eat, & Go Curriculum in their newly-built school gardens.

CYFAR programming is off to an excellent start, and all three Harmony School locations are going very well. Programming has officially launched at each site, and implementation has been smooth and consistent across all locations. From the very beginning, the youth have been highly engaged and enthusiastic about participating. They especially enjoyed learning about health and nutrition, along with hands-on gardening lessons that range from planting seeds to transplanting and caring for seedlings.

It has been especially rewarding to see some of the youth take what they have learned through CYFAR and apply it at home by starting small gardens of their own, showing that the program is making a meaningful and lasting impact beyond the classroom.



Back to Table of Contents

GROWING YOUNG GARDENERS

By Chevvy Tang, Master Gardener

Inspiring Kids

Brookwood Elementary GC

During this school year, our Master Gardeners were delighted to work with an enthusiastic group of 23 elementary school children in an afterschool gardening club. This vibrant program not only introduced these young learners to the wonders of gardening but also sparked their curiosity about the fascinating world of insects.

Junior Master Gardeners JMG

A key part of this experience was the Learn, Grow, Eat & Go (LGEG) component of JMG that empowers youth with hands-on gardening experiences, healthy eating and learning more about nature. We had so much fun! If you are interested in volunteering for JMG and sharing the love of gardening with youth, please email translation@harriscountymastergardeners.org. Whether you are certified AT in JMG or not, it's your passion and time that will make a difference!

Photos by Zach Florida

Special Thanks

MGs : Ana Lorena Jaramillo, Marilyn Lane, Chevvy Tang
County 4H : Kiara Carrasco
Parents Volunteer Lead: Zach Florida

Spotlight on Integrated Pest Management IPM

Article, photos and graphics by Debra Caldwell, Advanced Master Gardener: Entomology

Weeds! Bugs! Fungus! Disease! Sometimes gardening seems like a losing battle with pests. A pest is any unwanted organism that interferes with human activity. To battle pests, humans developed pesticides, substances that kill pests. The name gives us a clue about which type of pest will be killed by a pesticide. What do you think the following—insecticide, rodenticide, fungicide, bactericide, herbicide—are designed to kill? The most used pesticides are herbicides which kill plants that we consider to be weeds (2/3 of pesticides used in the United States).

During the boom in pesticides following World War II, there was increasing concern about the hazards of pesticides and environmental effects. Integrated Pest Management (IPM) was developed and now is a proven, practical approach that helps control pests while reducing pesticide risk. IPM has been around for decades—first called "integrated control" in the 1950s—and by 1972, Texas AgriLife Extension agents were already working with cotton producers across the state to put these ideas into practice.

Think of IPM as a "mix-and-match" toolkit. Instead of relying on just one approach, you combine several methods to keep pest numbers low enough that your plants stay healthy and productive. Emphasis is on avoiding chemical pesticides or using the least hazardous and most targeted types. The goal is simple: manage pests at acceptable levels while keeping the approach practical, affordable, and safer for you, your family, pets, and beneficial insects.

Start with prevention. Begin by improving soil conditions and creating a plant-friendly growing environment. Water appropriately (not too wet or too dry) and make sure you have good drainage. Go easy on fertilizer—lots of fresh, tender growth can be an open invitation to chewing and sucking insects.

Step 1: Build your knowledge base. First, figure out what's really going on. What does a healthy plant look like? Once you know "normal," it's much easier to spot trouble early. Not every problem is a pest. Before you reach

Spotlight on Integrated Pest Management IPM

Continued

for pesticides, consider other causes like watering issues, nutrient problems, weather damage, or disease. If a pest is involved, accurate identification helps you choose the best prevention and avoid unnecessary spraying.

To help identify "bugs," there are plenty of reliable books, websites, and apps. "Common Insects of Texas" is a field guide by John and Kendra Abbott. For quick IDs in the garden, the free "Seek" app by iNaturalist can be handy. BugGuide is also a helpful website for insect identification (BugGuide.net). The AgriLife Extension Entomology website is another great resource to find out what's bugging you.

To identify weeds in your lawn and garden beds, go to: https://aggieturf.tamu.edu/turfgrass-weeds/. The Texas Plant Disease Handbook is an electronic version of the printed handbook that was developed by Extension Plant Pathologists. It is packed with links about diseases affecting lawns, landscape plants, fruits and veggies, etc.

Step 2: Monitor and assess. Frequent, quick walks through the garden help you catch problems while they're still small. If you spot damage, look for clues: Is it just one plant or one type of plant? Are only certain parts affected (new growth, undersides of leaves, fruit)? Do you see a pattern—sunny spots, shady corners, or only along the edges of the bed? Those details can help you find the real cause. Deal with weeds while they are small and can be easily pulled. Nip the problem in the bud before they produce seeds.

Step 3: Decide your action threshold. This is the point at which pest numbers (or the damage you're seeing) tell you it's time to do something. In a home garden, thresholds are often about aesthetics and plant health: How much damage can you live with? Is the plant still growing well? Is the pest threatening your harvest? Are weeds crowding out desirable plants?

Step 4: Use a combination of tools. IPM works best when you layer strategies—biological, cultural, physical/mechanical, and (when necessary) chemical. A great place to start is with prevention. Choose pest-free plants and resistant varieties. Grow the right plant in the right place at the right time. That means that you should choose plants suited to your conditions, place them where they'll thrive, and plant them at the right time of the year. Plants that struggle in the wrong conditions are more likely to attract pests and disease. Healthy, vigorous plants are better at outgrowing damage, resisting disease, and competing with weeds. Also, clean up and dispose of infested plant material (don't compost it!).

Spotlight on Integrated Pest Management (IPM)

Continued

Cultural controls are everyday practices that make it harder for pests to get established, reproduce, and spread. For example, adjusting irrigation can prevent problems—too much water can encourage root disease and weeds. Building healthy soil, improving drainage, mulching, timing your planting, and staying on top of weeds all strengthen plants so they're less likely to become pest magnets. You can also include habitat (like diverse plantings) that supports natural predators.

Physical (mechanical) controls range from simple water sprays to nets, traps, and row covers. Larger pests like snails or hornworms can often be handpicked and squished. Netting can protect fruit trees from birds. For squash vine borers, wrapping the lower stems with a barrier (like foil) can help prevent egg-laying. And for household pests, exclusion is the first line of defense—repair window screens, seal gaps, and store food so you're not rolling out the welcome mat.

Biological controls work with nature. Your garden is part of an ecosystem, and many organisms help keep pests in check—predators (like lady beetles), parasitoids (like tiny parasitic wasps), and pathogens that infect pest insects. You can also take advantage of a plant's natural genetic resistance by choosing varieties that are bred to resist certain pests or diseases.

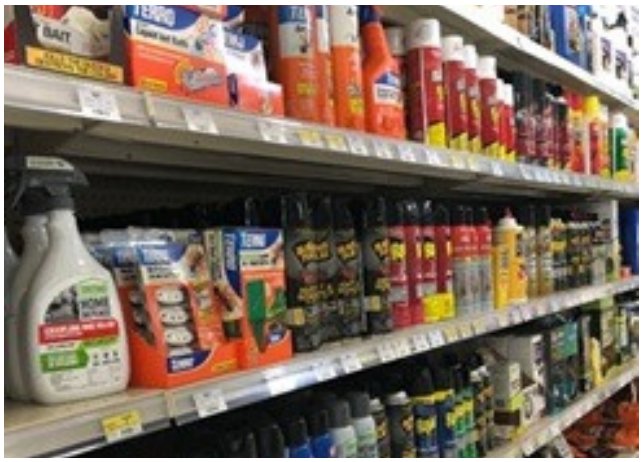
Chemical controls include soaps, botanicals, oils, and pesticides. In IPM, these are a last resort—used only when other methods haven't done enough, and always as part of an overall plan. When you do need a product, choose the most targeted option that will solve the problem while reducing risk to people, pets, pollinators, and other non-target organisms. You may think that a broad-spectrum pesticide that "kills everything" is the best choice but it may kill desirable organisms as well as pests. Look for selective products that are formulated for a specific pest. Also choose short-residual pesticides that don't persist for long. Read and

Spotlight on Integrated Pest Management (IPM)

Continued

follow the label directions exactly (timing, rate, and where to apply) and wear the recommended protective gear.

Step 5: <u>Keep records and follow up</u>. Jot down what you tried and what happened. Did it work? Were there any unintended side effects? What would you do differently next time? Even simple notes (date, plant, pest, and what you did) can make future pest problems much easier to solve.

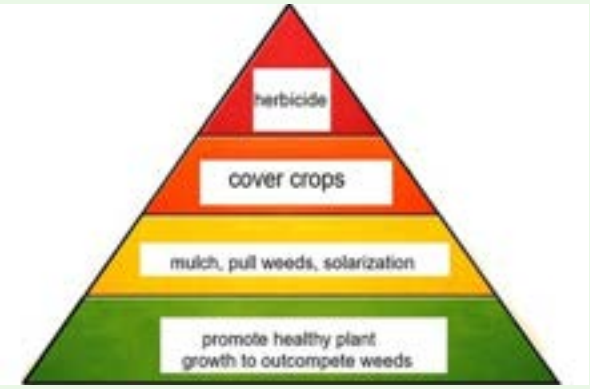


Let's look at how you can use IPM in your garden to combat weeds.

Step 1. What is normal for your garden? Many weeds are seasonal so knowing when they will appear will help you stay ahead of them.

Step 2. Correct identification of weed species is essential because annual weeds are easier to control when they are small. Eliminate perennial weeds before they reproduce. Weeds often indicate underlying issues like compacted soil, poor drainage, or improper watering.

Step 3. We usually need to act quickly to control weeds. They can be very aggressive and overrun a garden quickly.



Step 4. Intervene using the following methods. Cultural control is most effective for weeds. Improve lawn health through soil amendment, proper nutrient management, and proper mowing techniques to prevent weeds from being established. Physical control includes pulling, mowing, flaming, using mulch to smother weeds and solarization. Solarization is a process in which the soil is covered by plastic. The sun heats the soil enough to kill weed seeds. Biological control might include the use of cover crops or growing plants close together to prevent sunlight from reaching weeds. Corn gluten is an effective chemical method which prevents weeds from establishing roots. Spot treatment with herbicide is another chemical method. If other methods aren't effective, you may choose to apply pesticides safely and in compliance with local regulations to protect the ecosystem.

Step 5. Don't forget to keep records and evaluate the methods you used.

Spotlight on Integrated Pest Management IPM

Continued

Let's look at another example of applying IPM for sap-sucking insects like aphids or scale.

Step 1. What is normal for your garden? Aphid populations tend to increase in spring when plants have new growth.

Step 2. How many insects are present? Do you see damage to the plant? Are ants present? Do you see black sooty mold?

Step 3. Aphids are common but may not affect or harm plants very much.

Step 4. Intervene using the following methods:
Sometimes aphids can be eliminated simply by pruning out affected stems and leaves and disposing of them.

Don't over-fertilize plants. Do promote healthy growth. Physical methods to control aphids include covering young plants and knocking off aphids with a blast of water. Being patient and letting nature do the work is often effective. Parasitic wasps, lady beetles, lacewing larvae, and other predators eat aphids. Remember that their populations may lag behind the aphids so give them time. Chemical control may kill the natural predators so use them sparingly. Soaps, oils and pyrethrins are generally less toxic than synthetic chemicals.

Step 5. Did you eliminate aphids or control their numbers? Were there any unintended side effects? What will you do in the future for aphids?

Integrated pest management is not rocket science. IPM gives you a common-sense, sustainable way to respond to pests.

Remember that pests are a normal part of any landscape—and most aren't harmful. When pests do show up, observe, identify, choose the least-disruptive methods first, and protect the balance in your garden. A healthier ecosystem benefits your plants, your harvest, the environment, and YOU!

IPM resources:

- https://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/menu.homegarden.html
- https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2010/10/ipm.pdf
- https://ipm.tamu.edu/

To learn more about Integrated Pest Management, please join us:

for our GreenThumb presentation on IPM through the Houston Community College on May 11 at 10 am.
https://hcc.idloom.events/gardening-series/register

You can also view the presentation through Harris County Public Library live on May 19 at 11 am or watch the recording at a later time.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4dp6mTTEFI

What's Blooming in Your Garden?

Robbie Sharp shared the phlox growing around her tree

Alyssa Newcomb captured the shrimp plant, oxalis, and jasmine in her garden

Calylophus, Bluebonnets and Skullcap in Jennifer Bennett's native plant garden

What's Blooming in Your Garden?

Snapdragons and Bluebonnets line Valerie Depew's front walkway

Lucia Hansen shows off her new handheld tiller

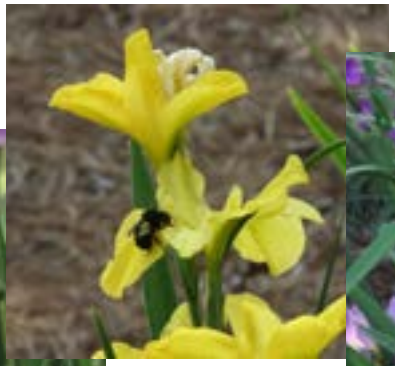
Jo Ann Stevenson spied a Sulphur caterpillar on a Cassia plant

Seen at Houston Botanic Garden by Jo Ann Stevenson:

What's Blooming in Your Garden?

More from Houston Botanic Garden:

Over at Mercer Botanic Garden:



Irises are showing off

Trees are busy, too. A chinese fringe and a mayhaw

Spotlight: Native Hollies

Article and photos by Brian Knoll, Master Gardener

Texas is home to these tough evergreen trees with the bright red berries. While you may have observed them mainly as thickets, many cultivars have defined shapes that can fit into any formal or semiformal yard design, most of them providing winter color and wildlife cover.

Yaupon Holly

Texas and southeastern U.S. host the Yaupon holly, *Ilex vomitoria*. The name derives from early observers who misunderstood Native American rituals that involved vomiting. In fact, potable teas and other infusions can be made from the leaves (though not the berries). The leaves are the only known wild source of caffeine in North America.

Hollies of *I. vomitoria* species and their cultivars are evergreen and very tough, being drought and salt-spray resistant and thrive in many kinds of soils. They are rated to zone 7a–9b, tolerating temperatures down to 0°F, and Houston's heat.

They are viable in part-shade to full sun (more sun means more berries). Their growth rates are called "moderate," usually defined as 12–24 inches/per year, depending on weather and soil conditions. As a native species, *I. vomitoria* is not especially susceptible to disease and pest, but issues may rarely crop up as with any plant. See here.

Berries. Small ('insignificant') white flowers bloom in the spring, and when pollinated, develop into red berries (technically, "drupes"). These are about a ¼ inch in diameter, appear in the fall and persist throughout the winter or until eaten by wildlife. Hollies are "dioecious," meaning each plant is either male or female. Berries are borne by female plants only, but this doesn't necessarily mean you need both a male and a female in your yard; there may be enough other hollies in your neighborhood to provide pollination.

Figure 1. *Ilex vomitoria*, showing random-ish growth habit.
(https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/ilex-vomitoria/)

Berry volume can vary from year to year, due to uneven rainfall and other climatic factors. For example, one year, in my neighborhood, a hurricane blew away all the acorns, pecans, etc., in the area, so local squirrels were forced to strip the berries from everyone's hollies.

Are the berries toxic? The professional consensus is that they are mildly so, if eaten in quantity (say >10). There may be nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea, but no deaths have ever been reported. (See here for a summary of available information).

Spotlight: Native Hollies
Continued

Wildlife. Yaupon hollies have great value for birds and other critters by providing berries and cover during the winter when other trees have lost their leaves. They are considered fairly deer-resistant, becoming vulnerable only if all other food sources are depleted.

Appearance. Yaupon hollies can get up to 20 feet high and wide, having a very unruly appearance, with multiple stems going in all directions, forming a thicket (Figure 1). They take to pruning very well, and many cultivars have been developed to grow into more pleasing shapes (see here). Some of these are noted below:

Upright varieties. Several types provide a much more vertical appearance, with parallel stems (this is called “fastigiate”), and grow up to 15–20 ft.

Will Fleming: A male cultivar having no berries. However, it can serve as a pollinator for nearby female hollies of other cultivars. Young plants will be narrow but widen upon maturity (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Will Fleming holly (https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/ilex-vomitoria-will-fleming/)

Scarlet’s peak: A female cultivar that produces a profusion of berries. Untrimmed, it grows upright and spreads out as it ages (Figure 3)

Figure 3. Scarlet’s peak holly, never trimmed. In a sheltered location, 13 years old from a 10 gal container. Photo taken in late March, berries are very persistent (author photo).

Folsom’s weeping and Pendula: two weeping cultivars (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Weeping yaupon holly, ‘Pendula’ (https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/ilex-vomitoria-pendula/).

Dwarves. Dwarf yaupon holly is a very common landscape shrub, especially in commercial settings, a testament to their ease of care. Be aware that dwarves come in male

Spotlight: Native Hollies

Continued

(no berries) and female cultivars, and that there may be confusion among suppliers, as one source states: "It seems quite likely that… cultivars have been confused and mixed up in nurseries over the decades but all sold under the 'Dwarf' or 'Nana' name." In typical use, these shrubs are closely trimmed into ovoid shapes, a sharp contrast to *I. vomitoria* found in the wild (Figure 5).

Figure 5. *I. vomitoria 'Nana'* (https://buchanansplants.com/plant-library/texas-native-shrubs/dwarf-yaupon-holly/)

Taylor's Rudolph: A female shrub reaching 3–5 feet tall and wide (berries).

Stokes Dwarf (aka Schilling's Dwarf): A male shrub, reaches ~2 ft. high and ~4 ft. wide, and has a fine, tight texture (no berries).

Dwarf (once called "Nana"): Grows 3–5 feet tall and 3–6 feet wide, with a dense texture (no berries).

Possumhaw

This native holly, *Ilex decidua*, grows as a small upright tree (15–20 ft), with much better manners than wild *I. vomitoria* (Figure 6). It is shade tolerant but produces more berries with greater sun exposure. Small white spring flowers are followed in fall by berries, slightly bigger than the yaupon holly's (as a side note, I have a single female in my yard that somehow gets pollinated every year). It is technically deciduous, though in the Houston area it may not lose all of its leaves, especially if sheltered. Drive north into the country in midwinter though, you may see spectacular displays of bare white branches bearing gobs of bright red berries. It is cold hardy, to zone 5, and heat tolerant.

Figure 6. Possumhaw, *I. decidua*, after losing its leaves in winter. (https://www.npsot.org/posts/native-plant/ilex-decidua/)

As for yaupon hollies, possumhaws also come in several cultivars (here for complete list). Notable ones are:

Warren's red: upright with heavy berry set;

Red cascade: light-colored bark, more horizontal spread;

Sentry: columnar habit and earlier leaf drop.

Conclusion. These small trees will fit comfortably into modestly sized yards, thrive under less-than-optimal conditions, and provide much needed winter color. Wildlife will appreciate the cover and food, too.

Spotlight Vegetable: Southern Peas

Article and photos by Jo Ann Stevenson, Master Gardener

Are those days long gone when family members, usually two or three generations at a time, would sit on the front porch and shell peas? It was a great way to combine necessary work with conversation on a hot summer day. Do you remember the aroma of freshly shelled Southern peas simmering on the stove? All you needed was salt, pepper and some ham for seasoning. I have fond memories of eating peas, with greens and hot cornbread on the side.

I grew two types of Southern peas last summer. They were both listed as cowpeas on the package—California Blackeye (Bush) and Pinkeye Purple Hull. I froze about 6 cups of fresh peas, and also picked about 1 cup of dried peas. The dried peas can be eaten later, or even used for seed to grow more peas.

These two photos I took from the front of the seed packets (Ferry-Morse).

History

Southern peas (*Vigna unguiculata*) are native to Africa and are more closely related to beans (*Phaseolus vulgaris*) than true peas (*Pisum sativum*), which are grown in the cool season. Most varieties are nitrogen-fixing, making them a great summer soil builder.

Varieties

Southern peas have various common names, such as cowpeas, field peas, black-eyed peas, purple hull peas, and crowder peas.

Crowders are plump peas that are crowded or packed so tightly in their pods that the peas are flattened or blunt on the ends. Non-crowders are rounded on the ends.

Some of the varieties recommended for Harris County are Blackeye #5, Mississippi Silver (crowder), Purple Hull, Texas Pinkeye, and Zipper Cream (also a crowder).

Planting and maintenance

Southern peas thrive on heat and full sun, and should be planted by seed well after the last frost (at least March or April). A second crop can be planted as late as July. They can be sown in raised rows (4–6 inches high) or in raised garden beds. Plant 2–3 inches apart and 1/2-inch deep; and thin to 6–8 inches apart once the seedlings are about 4 inches tall. Keep the bed well-watered until the seeds sprout, then a weekly watering during dry weather should be enough.

Peas are legumes and do not need additional fertilizer if planted in a garden bed that has been amended with organic matter or compost. Ideal pH is 6.0–7.0, but black-eyed peas tend to be more tolerant of alkaline soils. They are one of the easiest vegetables to grow, and are not picky about soil or water.

Spotlight Vegetable: Southern Peas

Continued

Diseases and pests

Root/stem rot can be avoided by providing good drainage and avoiding overwatering. Leaf spot can occur, so be sure to use drip irrigation instead of overhead sprinkling.

Aphids are the most frequent unwanted visitors, but be careful to apply any insecticides when bees and wasps aren't active.

Harvesting

Southern peas are ready to pick 55–75 days from planting by seed. Pick them when pods change from green to a cream, yellowish, lavender, reddish, or purple color, depending on the variety— when the peas are plump inside.

Purple Hull Peas ready to harvest

It's easy to get anxious and pick peas before they are fully developed. I'm guilty of this and immature peas are almost impossible to shell—but small, undeveloped peas can be cooked as "snaps" with the shelled peas so they don't go to waste.

Southern peas in the shell will only last about a day at room temperature (cover the basket with a cloth). They can be refrigerated in the shell for a few days in plastic bags (as long as they aren't wet). Shelled peas can be refrigerated up to a week, or frozen up to several years.

Uses

Southern peas are good sources of fiber, protein, calcium and phosphorus. Texas A&M AgriLife Extension recommends cooking your peas with bite-size pieces of salt pork, bacon or tasso (all optional) in a large pot. Sauté the meat over medium heat for 5–10 minutes with onions and peppers. Add the peas and enough water to cover, season with salt and black pepper. Bring to nearly a boil, and cook over low heat for at least 40 minutes or until the peas are tender. It is recommended to cover the pot and let sit 20 minutes before eating. Serve the peas over rice.

I encourage you to plant Southern peas in your garden. They love the summer heat, are easy to care for, and are very nutritious.

Resources:

- "Easy Gardening: Southern Peas" by Greg Grant and Larry Stein, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension, HORT-PU-265, January 2023, https://cdn-de.agrilife.org/extension/departments/hort/hort-pu-265/files/easy-gardening-southern-peas.pdf
- "Southern peas – a great summer vegetable" by Richard Bogren, https://www.lsuagcenter.com/portals/communications/news/news_archive/2013/july/get_it_growing/southern-peas--a-great-summer-vegetable
- Vegetable Varieties for Harris County, https://harris.agrilife.org/files/2025/02/2025-Vegetable-Varieties-1.pdf

Roselle: A hidden Garden Gem

Article and photos by Tracy Mason

If you are in Trinidad and Jamaica, you probably call it sorrel. Live in the southern U.S.? They are Florida cranberries. In Mexico, you may love a refreshing glass of Agua de Jamaica. But a roselle by any other name would taste as sweet (or tangy).

Hibiscus sabdariffa, otherwise known as “roselle” or simply “hibiscus," is native to Central and West Africa and is grown around the world. The heat-loving, tropical shrub is particularly suited for the Houston-area’s warm spring and summer months, and produces beautiful large blooms in early fall.

The edible flowers produced by roselle are one of the tastiest and prettiest in the garden. Bright red centers with white or light-yellow petals, the flowers resemble those of the okra plant—and for good reason: they are both members of the Malvaceae (mallow) family. Thus, roselle is resistant to many of the same pests that are thwarted by its gumbo-ingredient cousin.

Arguably the biggest bonus comes when the firm, fruit-like seed pods, get plump. The calyxes are removed with garden snips, peeled, and used to make jams, jellies, juices, syrups and more. Roselle’s lemon-with-a-hint-of-floral flavor is reminiscent of a blend of cranberry, rhubarb and citrus.

Every part of this plant is edible and can often be used as a substitute for other ingredients. Roselle becomes better than rhubarb in pies and, since it is packed with pectin, rivals the best strawberry jam. The seed pods in the center of the calyx can even be roasted and brewed like coffee for a caffeine-free alternative. Even the large green leaves make a nice surrogate for grape leaves in Greek dolmades or cabbage leaves in cabbage rolls.

Roselle is:

- Easy to grow
- Loves the Texas heat
- Makes a nice fruit substitute
- Resistant to many typical garden pests
- Every part of the plant is edible
- High in vitamins A and C
- High in anthocyanins (antioxidants) that give it that deep red color

Roselle: A hidden Garden Gem

Continued

When and How to Plant: Start seeds indoors or outdoors in April–May in Harris County. Roselle can also be propagated from cuttings. Ideally, space plants 3–5 feet apart so the calyxes have plenty of space to plump up.

Harvesting: Roselle can take up to 6 months to mature. When planted in spring, expect to harvest in October–November. Harvest when the flower has fallen off, and the calyx is plump, and red (not brown). Roselle is grown as an annual in our area due to its sensitivity to cold, so saving seed pods for drying is an effective way to propagate in future years.

Fertilizing and watering: Roselle doesn't need much fertilizing in our area's nutrient-rich clay soil, but ensure there is proper drainage, so roots don't rot.

Maintenance: Not much maintenance is needed. Roselle shrubs can reach 7–10 feet tall if not adequately pruned. Early pruning can encourage branching and fuller shrubs.

Uses: Calyxes can be used fresh and boiled for pancake syrup, jam or cranberry sauce substitute. They can be dried for tea or frozen for later use. Green leaves can be used fresh in salads or blanched for use in curries or other entrees. The slightly mucilaginous nature of the leaves when cooked makes an effective thickener in soups or stews.

Hibiscus Pancake Syrup

Article and photos by Tracy Mason

Ingredients:

1 cup dried roselle calyxes
2 cups water
1-1½ cups sugar (adjust to taste)
1 tbsp lemon juice

Optional flavor layers:
1 small piece fresh ginger
1 cinnamon stick
1 tsp vanilla extract (add at end)

Instructions:

1. Bring water to a boil. Add roselle (and ginger/cinnamon if using). Once boiling, reduce heat and simmer for 10–15 minutes. Ideally, you want a deep red, tart concentrate.
2. Strain out solids using a fine mesh or cheesecloth. Press gently to extract all the liquid.
3. Return liquid to the pot over medium heat and add sugar a little at a time and stir until dissolved.
4. Simmer for 10–20 minutes until reduced and slightly thickened. The syrup should coat the back of a spoon (it thickens more as it cools).
5. Remove from heat. Stir in lemon juice and vanilla extract (if using).
6. Let cool completely. Store in a sealed bottle in the fridge. The syrup can last for approximately 4 weeks if stored properly.

Bug Spotlight: Apple Snails

Article and graphics by Debra Caldwell, Advanced Master Gardener: Entomology

If you find a bright pink blob of little spheres along a body of water, you might wonder if it is candy, a toy, or a bit of trash. It might surprise you to learn that you discovered a mass of Apple Snail eggs. Like other snails, Apple Snails, *Pomacea maculata*, are mollusks and belong to Class Gastropoda which means "stomach foot" because they use their muscular "foot" to glide along on a slimy trail of mucus.

They live up to their name because they can grow to be as large as an apple or baseball. They have yellow to brown shells that may have spiral bands.

This invasive species originated in South America but was introduced into Taiwan as a commercial, high protein food source. Unfortunately, it found its way into rice fields and became a pest. When it reached Hawaii in the 1990s it spread into taro fields and decimated crops.

Thankfully, these hulks of the snail world have no interest in our gardens. They usually stay under water in slow-moving freshwater like lakes, ponds, ditches, and rivers. At night, adults may come to the edge of a body of water to feed and lay their mass of eggs above the water line.

In the United States, snails were released into the wild in Florida and quickly spread through the southeast and into Texas. Although they don't move well over land, they readily move from one waterway to others. The eggs can be transported on boats, crawfish traps, or other equipment. Flooding events such as Hurricane Harvey have also helped to spread the snail across much of the Gulf Coast. It is now in at least twenty Texas counties including Harris and Galveston counties. The body of water where I discovered the eggs is completely landlocked, so the snails (or eggs) were probably unintentionally transported by people.

The large snails impact aquatic environments by competing with native snail species. They feed on massive amounts of aquatic plants. They also burrow into and damage levees. Rice growers in Texas are concerned about possible damage to their crops if the snails become more established. Apple Snail populations can grow quickly as each snail can lay masses of hundreds of pink eggs every week or two. You will find the eggs on the shore of a body of water. The little snails move into water after they hatch.

Bug Spotlight: Apple Snails

Continued

In addition to decimating aquatic ecosystems, the snails can also harm humans and other mammals. The pink eggs have a neurotoxin that can irritate skin and eyes. Both the eggs and adults may carry a type of parasitic nematode, rat lungworm (*Angiostrongylus cantonensis*), which can cause eosinophilic meningitis—a serious and potentially fatal brain infection.

What should you do if you find eggs or adults? Don't touch them! Use a shovel or stick to knock the egg mass into the water. To be doubly safe, I smash the eggs with a shovel then push them into the water.

The next step is to report your sighting. Include a photo of an adult snail or pink egg masses for species confirmation and submit a texasinvasives.org Report It! form or submit a detailed email to TPWD Aquatics at aquatic.invasives@tpwd.texas.gov, or the TISI email at invasives@shsu.edu.

References

- https://texasinvasives.org/animal_database/detail.php?symbol=15
- https://tsusinvasives.org/home/database/pomacea-maculata
- https://www.lsuagcenter.com/articles/page1718814915423

Jethro Tull (1674-1740), Pioneer of Mechanized Agriculture

By John Moss, Master Gardener

Imagine a TV Jeopardy show in which the following was presented:
Category: British Names Throughout History
Clue: This name belongs both to an 18th-century agricultural innovator who championed the seed drill and to a British rock group formed in 1967.
Correct Response: Who is Jethro Tull?

Jethro Tull, the person, was one of the three leading innovators of the 18th-century British Agricultural Revolution. Along with Robert Bakewell, who pioneered scientific breeding of cattle and sheep, and Charles “Turnip” Townshend who created The Norfolk Four Course Crop Rotation system (and was the subject of an article in the March/April 2026 edition of Urban Dirt), Tull’s contribution to agriculture by applied engineering laid the foundation for modern planters like John Deere’s “ExactEmerge.”

Who was the man that invented the horse drawn seed drill and why did he do it? Jethro Tull was born in Berkshire, England, in 1674 and was trained in the legal profession. In 1693 he was called to the Gray’s Inn Bar in London; in other words, he became a fully fledged lawyer. However, shortly after this he became seriously ill with a pulmonary disorder and travelled to Europe in search of a cure in a warmer climate. Much of his time in Europe was spent in Montpellier in the South of France and it was here that he developed a passionate interest in agriculture, particularly how the agricultural practices of France and Italy compared to that of England. In all three countries he witnessed firsthand the waste and inefficiency associated with the hand broadcasting of seeds and became convinced that crops would grow better if seeds were planted in precise rows at a controlled depth. He noticed that vineyard workers maintained precise spacing, which impressed him and shaped his overall thinking about systematic planting.

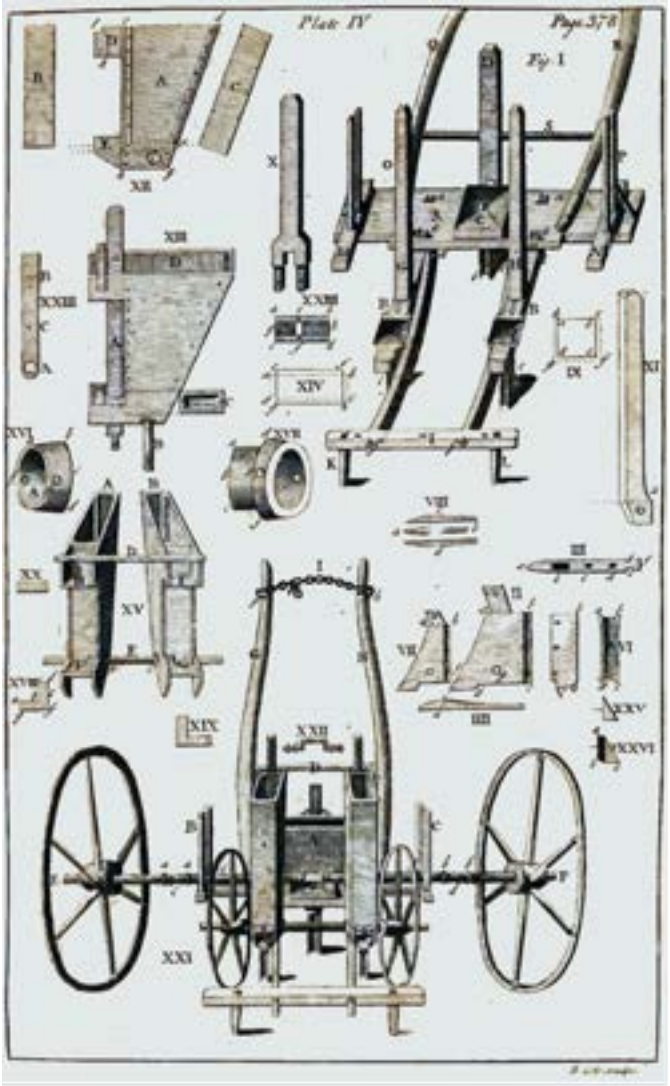
Jethro Tull - Circa 1720 - Artist Unknown

Back to Table of Contents

Jethro Tull (1674-1740), Pioneer of Mechanized Agriculture

Continued

During this time in Continental Europe, he designed and built his most famous invention, the horse-drawn mechanical seed drill. From the exploded-view diagram below it can be seen that, for its time, the seed drill was a complex piece of agricultural equipment.



Horse-drawn Seed Drill invented by Jethro Tull in 1701

The seed drill worked by performing three actions in one continuous motion: opening the soil, delivering seeds at controlled intervals, and covering them again—all powered by the forward movement of a horse-drawn frame. Mechanically, the operation of the drill can be broken down into the following stages:

1. **Set-up: Engage the Ground-Opening Ploughshares.** The drill first cut narrow, consistent furrows into the soil.
   - Small ploughshares or coulters sliced the soil to a uniform depth.
   - The depth was fixed by the frame and wheel height.
   - This ensured every seed would be planted at the same depth for even germination.

2. **Critical Mechanism: Meter Seeds from the Hopper.** A rotating mechanism regulated how many seeds left the hopper.
   - A wooden hopper held the bulk seed supply.
   - A fluted or notched cylinder rotated as the wheels turned.
   - This rotation released seeds at steady, predictable intervals—the key innovation.

3. **Guide Seeds Down Tubes into the Furrows.** Gravity and motion carried seeds directly into the opened grooves.
   - Seed tubes ran from the hopper down to each furrow.
   - Seeds dropped precisely where the drill placed them—not scattered.
   - This eliminated waste from birds, wind, and uneven distribution.

Jethro Tull (1674-1740), Pioneer of Mechanized Agriculture

Continued

4. **Finishing Step: Cover the Seeds Automatically.** Chains or harrows dragged behind the drill to close the furrow.
   - Light chains or small harrows pulled soil back over the seeds.
   - This protected the seeds and ensured good soil contact.
   - The field was left in neat, straight rows ready for germination.

The reason the seed drill was revolutionary can be summarized as follows:

- Uniform depth → more consistent germination
- Uniform spacing → easier weeding and cultivation
- Reduced seed waste → fewer seeds eaten by birds or lost
- Straight rows → enabled later innovations like horse-drawn hoes

Jethro Tull permanently returned to England from Continental Europe in 1709 and moved into a farm in Shelbourne in his native county of Berkshire. Apparently, he lost interest in the legal profession! However, he continued to invent agricultural equipment and, in the last ten years of his life, was well known for demonstrating his seed drill and his horse-drawn hoe, the second of his innovative inventions.

Tull's methods were adopted by many landowners and helped to provide the basis for modern agriculture.

Painting/Mural of the agricultural pioneer Jethro Tull (1674-1740) demonstrating his seed drill to farm workers. Artist: Alfred Reginald Thomson (1955) - Commissioned by the Science Museum, London.

Jethro Tull (1674-1740), Pioneer of Mechanized Agriculture

Continued

Finally, for those who might be curious as to how a very successful rock group formed in 1967 in the Northwest English seaside town of Blackpool came to be named Jethro Tull, the story is interesting from a musical perspective, if not an agricultural one.

In 1967-68 the newly formed band started to play the London club circuit but found it difficult to obtain repeat bookings. They changed their name frequently to continue playing the circuit. The names were often supplied by their booking agent's staff, one of whom, a history buff, gave them the alias Jethro Tull.

The name stuck because they were using it when the manager of London's renowned Marquee Club liked their show enough to give them weekly residency. Ian Anderson, the founder of the band, said that he didn't particularly like the name, but he decided to keep it. Jethro Tull has since sold over 60+ million albums and is still going strong. Anderson's estimated personal net worth is $150 million. Not bad for a band named after the inventor of the seed drill!

John Deere "ExactEmerge" Planter - 300+ years after Jethro Tull's Seed Drill

Bonus fun fact: There is a Coreopsis plant named after Jethro Tull as well. It's drought-tolerant and thrives in full sun. Perfect for our zone.

Back to Table of Contents

Spotlight Recipe: Three-Color Orzo Salad

By Jo Ann Stevenson, Master Gardener

This orzo salad is a great alternative to a traditional pasta salad. I first tasted this dish at a family reunion in June 2024, and thought how much I'd like to enjoy it again. Fast forward one year and, thankfully, the same salad was served at the next family reunion. That year we actually did make the recipe in our cooking group and everyone agreed it was a keeper.

It can be served as a side dish, or even as a main dish by adding the protein of your choice. Slivered almonds can easily be substituted for pine nuts, and dried cranberries could be substituted if you cannot find dried cherries.

The original recipe is from celebrity chef Giada De Laurentiis, and can be found in the "Dressing Up BBQ" episode of her *Everyday Italian* TV series. Here is a link to the recipe and video: https://www.foodnetwork.com/recipes/giada-de-laurentiis/tri-colore-orzo-recipe-1948079

In her video, Giada explains that "Tri-Colore" means three colors, and she adds three vibrant colors to the salad to brighten it up—arugula and basil for green, dried cherries for red, and ricotta salata (or feta) cheese for white.

While she doesn't specify, I suspect that the three colors and name are a nod to the Italian flag, known as Il Tricolore, and has three equal vertical bands of green, white, and red.

I hope you will try the recipe and enjoy it—and I certainly hope cousin Stephanie makes the orzo salad again for this summer's family reunion.

Photo from Food Network

Level: Easy
Total: 40 min
Yield: 4–6 servings

Ingredients:

1 pound orzo pasta
3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, plus 1/4 cup
2 cups fresh arugula (about 3 ounces)
3/4 cup crumbled ricotta salata cheese or feta cheese
1/2 cup dried cherries
12 fresh basil leaves, torn
1/4 cup toasted pine nuts
3 tablespoons lemon juice
1 1/2 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

Directions:

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil over high heat. Add the pasta and cook until tender but still firm to the bite, stirring occasionally, about 8–10 minutes.
Drain pasta and put the pasta on a large cookie sheet. Drizzle the pasta with 3 tablespoons olive oil, toss, spread out, and set aside to cool.
Once the orzo is cool, transfer to a large serving bowl. Add the remaining ingredients and toss gently to combine. Serve.

Getting Down to Earth

News from Genoa Friendship Gardens

Article and Photos by Pam Longley, Master Gardener

Open Garden Days at GFG are from March–October and allow the public to come in to buy plants out of the greenhouse and to ask questions of Master Gardeners. We never know who we will meet, but many comment on what a “little jewel” we have out here.

Regina Flaherty at the AAMG table at Open Garden Day

We will be drawing up a plan for an ADA compliant path into our gardens as funds have finally been distributed from a grant secured by Harris County Extension.

Our last Spring plant sale in April grossed approximately $4000 for perennials, peppers and herbs. Many plants sold out in just a few days online!

Intern Karen Duston and Master Gardener Jeanne Dunn donated two benches built by Karen’s husband. Not only are they beautiful but they will be a respite for weary gardeners!

Students from Dr. Kirk Lewis Career and Technical School next door have two more dates scheduled to help at our gardens. Some of the boys learned to pull up spent broccoli and greens by cutting them in sections small enough to go right into our compost. Then they heard about how pollinators come to the flowers as their final life cycle and a little bit about how the compost breakdown works. Several students have requested hours this summer to come out and help!

Student gardeners from Tina Dvorak’s class at Dr. Kirk Lewis Career and Technical School

Getting Down to Earth

Continued

In the vegetable beds, we are striving to grow some exciting and unique crops this spring such as “Algerian” and “Munchee” cucumbers, Purple Magnolia pole beans that turn green when you cook them, “Honey and Cream” yellow and white corn, and Texas Granno onions (our first time to grow onions). Noe Tristan has done a “chop and drop” for green manure from a cover crop we planted in the fall called “Crimson Clover” for one tomato bed. For the other tomato bed, he left “Crimson Clover” and Buckwheat cover crops growing behind the tomato plants. We will see if they are good companions or if they fight each other for nutrients.

Carolyn Boyd with Jenn, our farm cat, on her back

As seen at GFG:

Maggie Mentakis with our Texas Granno onions. One of the new benches is behind her.

Red Velour petunias from All American Selections.

The Mission of Yahweh, More than a Garden

By Patricio Arteaga, Master Gardener

A new volunteering opportunity for Master Gardeners is at the Mission of Yahweh, a shelter for women and children in Northwest Houston. This organization provides shelter, food, and training for women who are having difficulties in life. The Mission's motto is "Restore Hope, Transform Lives, End Homelessness."

This location had a vegetable garden that was in service for several years. During the pandemic crisis, it was abandoned and became a weed haven.

We discussed the possibility of reactivating the garden with the Mission. After a meeting with the Mission Director and the Master Gardener Volunteer Coordinator, my wife Marisol Arteaga and I started working in the garden. Soon, we had two other volunteers that joined us. Now we have six volunteers that work at the garden.

The task of removing weeds was intensive; we used cardboard, weed control fabric, and mulch, plus of course, the inevitable weed-pulling by hand. We try to grow a mix of vegetables that are palatable to many people.

Master Gardeners posing with a resident and the director of the mission

We harvested eggplants, okra, peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers, carrots, cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, lettuce, Swiss chard, mustard greens, collards, and a few more. The staff and residents are always welcoming and happy with our contribution to their environment.

We are working to expand our activities, with a day camp for the children of the Mission and a children's garden. The director has expressed interest in improving the landscaping with native plants, and any volunteers interested in these areas would be welcomed.

But this is not just a garden. This garden is maintained with the help of a few residents who have been interested in learning about gardening. As their stay in the Mission is temporary, sometimes we have a rotation of new people. Working in the garden empowers them to learn and grow their skills, gain confidence in their lives, and become more optimistic. The Mission itself provides training opportunities for residents. We have seen many moving on with their lives, finding jobs and then eventually moving out of the shelter.

Garden produce

Jeanine showing a harvest of Brussels sprouts and carrots

Back to Table of Contents

Ask A Master Gardener Online

by the AAMGO Committee

Q:

Hello! I've removed three trees from my property due to excessive black scale leading to damaged roots. One tree (young oak tree) was in the middle of the backyard, surrounded by Augustine grass. The second tree, was in a small mulched garden in my backyard corner against the fence. Third tree (crepe Myrtle) was in the front garden in black mulch.

We attempted to treat the black scale with the systemic granules and also treated with a spray. It was not successful.

I am eager to re-plant trees and add plants to our garden but I am worried about the black scale coming back. My neighbor's trees seem unaffected. Is there anything I should do to the soil before buying new trees and plants?

A:

Thank you for reaching out to us with your question about the scale infestation in your yard. Given the experience you describe, I can understand your concern with preventing a recurrence as you prepare your garden and yard for what will hopefully be a successful gardening season.

My understanding of your situation is that you identified a problem that you diagnosed as black scale on three trees in different parts of your yard, including an oak and crape myrtle. You tried different strategies, including application of a spray as well as systemic pesticide in granule form, but, ultimately, you removed all three trees. You are now asking if there is a good method to pre-treat the soil to make sure that the scale infestation does not come back. There are two issues that are not clear to me from your description: How long has it been since you removed the trees? Have you noticed any scale infestation or development anywhere since on your property?

In researching a response to your question, I found that the prevalent advice among extension services across the nation is to recommend an Integrated Pest Management (IPM) approach. This approach begins with scouting and identification for a recurrent infestation. For new plants that you might acquire for this year, that would mean a thorough inspection of any tree or plant you consider bringing into your yard to determine if any stage of scale development is present. The approach also incorporates cultural control practices, such as maintaining appropriate irrigation, fertilization and sanitation practices to ensure the health of all your plants and trees, as scale and other pests tend to begin infestation of weakened or stressed plants. Plants are particularly susceptible during times of drought, making adequate irrigation essential during our hot summers. Mechanical control includes techniques such as scraping the scale away and washing the affected plants with soapy water to remove and kill the scale, as well as pruning the parts of plants where you notice scale development and disposal of those diseased parts. Another mechanical control method is pruning to thin out canopy as early-stage scale nymphs are susceptible to drying out when exposed to sun and wind. Mechanical control might also mean removal of the mulch you mentioned as surrounding one of the removed trees. Biological control focuses on the

Ask A Master Gardener Online

Continued

nurturing of beneficial insects, such as certain forms of lady beetles and parasitic wasps. Finally, there is chemical control, which can be organic through the use of horticultural oils, or may rely on commercially-available pesticides like the ones you have used. You can review a very thorough discussion of IPM for scale, with helpful photos to identify various stages of the insect's development, published by the University of California. A shorter version published by Texas A&M AgriLife Extension, the Earth-wise Guide to Scale Insects, describes the timing for application of dormant and horticultural oils to kill scale at the early stages of development and provides a chart with several recommended oils as well as chemical pesticides. Application of horticultural oils is only effective when applied at the early stage of scale development (when they are known as "crawlers"), and that would mean applying such oils as soon as leaves emerge in early spring. Clemson University provides detailed instructions for using the oils together with recommendations for monitoring multiple generations of scale emerging throughout the year.

Among the recommendations for treating scale, I do not find a general, preventative treatment regime to be applied in the absence of the identification of a specific location of infestation. The application of organic horticultural oils or systemic pesticides presumes a specific location to be treated. The Earth-wise Guide above indicates that horticultural oils like canola oil or certain insecticidal soaps have low toxicity, such that they could be applied to areas where your previous infestations occurred. However, that approach risks under-treating, to the extent that there is incipient scale in other areas of your yard, while spraying everywhere risks over-treating perfectly healthy plants with some possible impact on beneficial insects that the spraying might touch directly, such as pollinators currently present. Applying pesticide more widely risks greater impact both on healthy plants and beneficial insects and microorganisms.

In your case, I would recommend starting an IPM approach by scouting and identifying any possible scale infestation in your yard now and on any plants that you might purchase. Consider seeking assistance from the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Urban Entomology service. They can help you identify exactly what type of scale or other insect might be present so that you can develop a very tailored strategy to deal with that insect. I mention that service because you identified one of your affected trees as a crape myrtle. Recently, a specific type of scale has infested crape myrtle trees in Texas, and Texas A&M AgriLife Extension has developed specific recommendations for that type of scale.

Ask A Master Gardener Online

Continued

Q:

Hello, I have a question about what to do to stop a fungus. I have attached a picture of the yellow fungus growing out of the upper section of a Sweet Gum tree which stands well over 50 ft. The tree is off the shore of the Trinity River on some family property by about 70 ft. along the lower level of the flood plain where it floods every spring for about a month. The rest of the time the ground is dry and gets lots of wind through the limbs daily. The fungus is growing out about 12 ft. up the trunk and has sap running from it down to the ground.

Can you please tell me what to spray on it and during what weather conditions and how often? Plus, anything else related to the treatment would be greatly appreciated. Which procedure first and so on. Also, can you please tell me what is to be expected with the future of this magnificent tree? The umbrella of limbs doesn't start for about 20 ft. Thank you very much.

A:

Thank you for your question and your photo. Sweetgum trees, *Liquidambar styraciflua*, are hardy native trees, though like most trees, they can be susceptible to a variety of pests and diseases. Unfortunately, your photo shows conks on the trunk of your tree, which is the fruiting body of a shelf or bracket fungus. Conks are usually indicative of wood rot in the roots and interior of the tree.

I can't identify the species of fungus from your photo, but its presence means the fungus has likely moved into the inner wood of the tree. It's hard to say why your sweetgum tree has developed wood rot. Trees often develop conks after they have been damaged in a flood, and yours has been through quite a few floods. Sweetgum trees are known to be tolerant of flooding, but according to one of our Texas A&M Forestry Service articles, sometimes the timing and length of a flood can make a difference.It's also possible that the recent cycles of flood and drought have been too much for your tree, or perhaps there has been some damage from limb loss or boring insects that has allowed infection by a fungus.

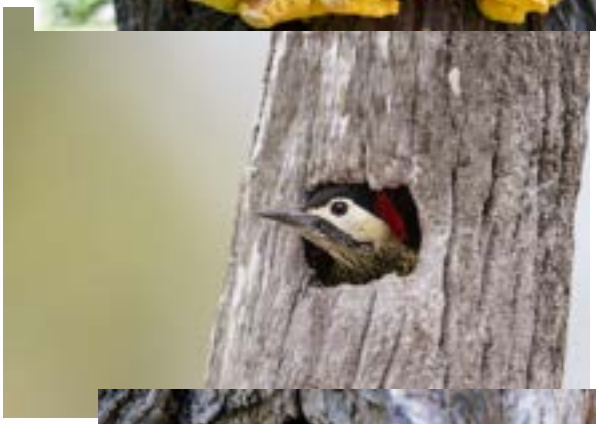
Usually when you start to see conks on a tree trunk, either at the base or higher up, it means that the tree's stability could be compromised. Here is some information from the University of Georgia to help walk you through a tree health evaluation, and here is information, Wood Decay Fungi in Landscape Trees, from the University of California. As you'll see in the articles, there isn't going to be anything that you can do for the tree when the trunk and roots are compromised. An article from Texas A&M about hardwood decay in forest management for lumber says that once the decay process begins, there is no control. I have seen some old information that talks about cutting out wood decay on trunks and filling holes with concrete and insulation but those practices are no longer considered appropriate in arboriculture, as they can further compromise the tree, trap moisture, and accelerate the tree's decline.

Ask A Master Gardener Online

Continued

If you want to further identify the problem and determine the extent of the decay to give you an idea about how much longer the tree might be able to survive, and/or if the tree is in area where it can harm people, pets, vehicles, or structures should it fall, then you would want to contact a certified professional arborist who can conduct a site visit to examine the tree and surrounding conditions and give you a quote for removal if necessary. If you don't have a certified professional arborist, we recommend the "Find An Arborist" feature at treesaregood.org. It's always a good idea to talk to several certified arborists, check their references, and get all proposals for services in writing.

If the tree is not in an area where it would cause any harm if it falls, then you might want to consider letting nature take its course, and allowing birds to make use of the tree as it declines—birds will be able to feed on insects that find the tree, and use any hollow areas that form as nest cavities. Best wishes, and I'm sorry that I don't have better news for you.



Click here if you have a question to submit to our Ask A Master Gardener Online committee.

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension in Harris County

AgriLife Extension's Horticulture program in Harris County promotes research based horticultural practices that help residents create beautiful, productive gardens and landscapes while conserving water and other natural resources.

Find other Harris County AgriLife Extension Publications.

Meet a Master Gardener

Chris and Tracy Mason

We were both a couple of suburban kids growing up. Our foray into gardening and agriculture went something like this—

> ***Tracy**: We should start a garden this year.*
> ***Chris**: Nah, my parents had a garden when I was young and I remember it being a lot of work.*
> ***Tracy**: Come on, it'll be fun. Here, plant these radish seeds with me.*
> ***Chris**: <sigh> Ok (grumbling under my breath about stupid vegetables)*

Three weeks later we're eating the best radishes that I've ever tasted. That year the entire backyard was overtaken by raised beds. I was hooked, but Tracy wasn't finished yet. "You know, if we had some chickens we could have fresh eggs, too!", she said.

So we sold our suburban home and bought a couple of acres out in the country. If radishes were our gateway vegetable, chickens were definitely our gateway animal. We have raised chickens, ducks, rabbits, goats, sheep, and pigs.

Tracy found the HCMG program while looking for volunteer opportunities. Education combined with community service was very attractive. I joined the following year. Together we have found a wonderfully amazing bunch of people making the world a better place one seed at a time.

Meet a Master Gardener

Marilyn Lane

I am a devoted wife, mother, and passionate gardener who finds joy in nurturing both people and plants. As of May 31, 2026, I celebrated 40 wonderful years of marriage—a milestone that reflects my deep commitment to family, love, and faith. I am the proud mother of two adult children, and caring for my family has always been at the heart of who I am.

As a homemaker, I have embraced the role of creating a warm, healthy, and loving environment. My passion for flowers led me to earn my floral license at Lone Star College in Tomball, Texas, where I discovered the beauty of designing for weddings and special occasions. Whether arranging blooms or dreaming up new floral projects, I love working with flowers in any form.

About 15 years ago, I began my gardening journey—and it quickly became a lifelong passion. My first proud success was growing curly kale. After tasting how fresh, tender, and flavorful it was compared to store-bought produce, I knew I was "hooked." That moment sparked a deeper curiosity that has grown into a true calling.

Since then, I have become an avid and dedicated gardener, learning not only how to grow flowers and vegetables, but I've also embraced the science, mental wellness, and joy that gardening brings. I am especially passionate about helping my family eat healthier by growing our own food, and I love sharing what I've learned with friends, neighbors, and

even strangers I meet along the way—because I truly believe there are no strangers, only opportunities to connect.

I became a Master Gardener with the goal of educating and inspiring others to grow and enjoy food from their own backyards. In my free time I volunteer with plant sales, with the Hospitality committee and many other areas. I also enjoy staying active at the gym, sharing gardening tips, and serving as a member of Lakewood Church, where I also connect with others through my love of gardening.

My journey is rooted in faith, family, and growth—and I look forward to continuing to learn, teach, and cultivate both gardens and community wherever I go.

Meet a Master Gardener

Pam Longley

I have to say that I would rather buy plants than clothes. My passion for gardening has spanned over 35 years. I started my career as a “hippie typist” and worked my way up to Vice President of Old Republic Title. Most of my years in the title insurance business were spent closing residential and commercial properties and handling management responsibilities.

For 20 years, I wanted to be a Master Gardener, but the time constraints of my job didn’t allow for the class hours. Upon retirement in 2019, I signed up to take the courses and have been volunteering primarily at Genoa Friendship Gardens (GFG) in the vegetable production beds and perennial trial gardens ever since. I write the “Getting Down to Earth” column for Urban Dirt and I am on the GFG Steering Committee.

I have been a docent at the Houston Arboretum for over 20 years and I work on philanthropic projects for The Professional Group and I am President of the Daughters of the King of the Palmer Memorial Episcopal Church. I have been a presenter and mentor at Angela House and was a reading coach and girls’ empowerment group leader at Kipp Sharpstown College Preparatory Academy for 6 years.

Besides gardening, I love hiking, yoga and travel.

Visit us at these social media pages:

Harris County Master Gardeners Facebook Page

Harris County Master Gardeners Instagram Page

For Master Gardeners only:

Discover our Exclusive Range at HCMG Merch Store
hcmg-merch-store.printify.me/

Ask a Master Gardener at McGovern Centennial Gardens

MASTER GARDENERS in the city

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension
in partnership with
Hermann Park Conservancy
are pleased to present

Master Gardeners in the City at McGovern Centennial Gardens

The Harris County Master Gardeners maintain the vegetable, herb, berry, and citrus beds in the Family Garden on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, so if you see one of us working there, feel free to say hi.

McGovern Centennial Gardens at Hermann Park
1500 Hermann Drive
Houston, Texas 77004

Visit our Ask a Master Gardener table in the Family Garden on the first Saturday of each month!

Genoa Friendship Gardens

The Flower Trial Garden

The Water Garden

The Greenhouse

The Texas A&M Extension Service and Harris County Master Gardeners
invite you to join us at

The Genoa Friendship Gardens

located at
1210 Genoa Red Bluff Road
Houston, Texas 77034

Weekly Garden Hours: Open all year round, Monday and Wednesday mornings,
9 a.m. – 11 a.m. (weather permitting)

We welcome professional organizations, schools, churches and individual tours of the garden! If interested in a tour, please email the HCMGA Program Coordinator at coordinator.harrishort@gmail.com

Open Garden Days

are on the 3rd Monday of the month, ***May through October***, 8:30 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.
Admission to the Exhibit Gardens is free. Register at the Welcome Table
to receive additional monthly notices for children and family events.

- Tour the variety of exhibits to inspire you with vegetable, perennial, rose, tropical and native gardens.
- Visit our Ask a Master Gardener table for information about planting citrus, fruit or berries for your home orchard or vegetable garden.
- Contemplate the joy in the Earth-Kind Garden and catch a view of the Water Garden.
- Don’t leave the GFG until you have shopped the Greenhouse where seasonal herbs, vegetables and perennials are available for sale.

Gardening Calendar

By Karen Shook, Master Gardener

Hurricane season starts June 1. Make sure trees are trimmed with no dead branches waiting to fall in a wind storm.

With summer heat approaching, consider heat tolerant plant additions. Elephant ears, for example, love the heat. Ornamental grasses will do well in the heat as long as they have adequate moisture.

Year-to-date rainfall is a little below average after low numbers in January and February. Temperatures have been a little above historic average and forecasts currently predict slightly higher than average temperatures will continue. Replenish mulch as needed to help keep roots cool.

Be alert for pests as they will be getting more active as the weather warms. Some pest damage is inevitable, but watch and limit (pick them off, spray them off). Not all insects are pests. Learn to recognize beneficial insects. There are plenty of websites with information; the link below is to a site I particularly like. Insect Field Guide

Perennials and Ornamental Grasses

- Continue deadheading (removing spent blossoms down to first set of leaves). As blooms decline, cut back perennials by 1/3 to help promote new growth. Fertilize and water after cutting.
- Fertilize irises after they finish blooming. Other perennials should be fertilized as needed. If plant is growing vigorously, with deep green leaves and plenty of blooms, it probably doesn't need to be fertilized.

Annuals

- Replace cool season annuals, which have likely declined, with warm season annuals. You can direct seed many warm season annuals if you make sure they have enough water.
- Cut back plants when blooms decline to encourage new growth. Fertilize as needed, usually every 4–6 weeks.

Bulbs

- Cut back yellow foliage of spring flowering bulbs, but not until the yellow or brown color tells you the bulbs have replenished stored reserves. Dig, and reset the bulbs if desired.
- Seedpods that may form after bulbs blooms are a waste of the plant's energy. As you walk through your garden, remove the pods and old flower spikes.
- Fertilize actively growing bulbs and provide support for tall growing bulbs.

Gardening Calendar

Continued

Roses

- In your morning garden rounds, cut some roses (to first leaf with 5 leaflets) to enjoy indoors.
- Continue to spray for blackspot, powdery mildew, aphids, etc. every 7–10 days through November. Decreased foliage from blackspot or powdery mildew reduces bloom potential. Keep the beds cleaned of any leaves that yellow and drop.
- Fertilize every 4–8 weeks depending on health of the rose.

Shrubs/Trees

- Prune spring flowering shrubs, trees, and vines after they finish flowering.
- Spring blooming azaleas should be pruned by early June.

Lawns

- Frequent mowing at the proper height for your type of lawn is a good way to increase lawn density and help choke out weeds. Make sure you only remove 1/3 of the height each mowing.
- Check the label if you are tempted to apply weed killer. Many can damage the lawn if temperatures are high.
- St. Augustine Management Calendar may be useful in planning your lawn care.
- Now is a good time to fill low areas with soil similar to native soil. If you lay new sod, be sure to keep it moist.

Edibles (vegetables, herbs, berries, fruits)

- Enjoy your harvest!
- You can still plant heat tolerant okra, southern peas, sweet potatoes. Soak the area before planting.
- See the following link for recommended plantings times: Harris County Veg Planting Guide

Groundcovers and Vines

- Dig and divide established ground covers in May. Tough ground covers like Asian jasmine should be okay if planted in June.
- Most woody vines bloom in the spring. Prune spring flowering vines after they finish flowering. Snip back and wind vines through support to keep them looking neat.

Works Cited

1. A Garden Book for Houston. 2nd ed., River Oaks Garden Club, Houston, TX 1968.
2. Groom, Dale, and Dan Gill. Texas Gardener's Handbook. Cool Springs Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2012.
3. Richter, Robert. Month-by-Month Gardening Texas. Cool Springs Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2014.
4. Weather.gov/wrh/climate

Ask A Master Gardener In-Person Events

Saturday, May 2, 2026, 2:00 p.m. - 4:00 p.m.
Earth Day - Octavia Fields Branch Library
1503 S. Houston Ave, Humble 77338

Saturday, May 2, 2026 8:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.
Urban Harvest Farmers Market
2752 Buffalo Speedway, Houston 77027

Saturday, May 2, 2026, 9:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.
McGovern Centennial Gardens - Family Gardens
1500 Hermann Dr, Houston 77004

Saturday, May 2, 2026, 10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.
Mercer Botanic Gardens
22306 Aldine Westfield Rd, Humble 77338

Sunday, May 3, 2026, 9:00 a.m. - 11:00 a.m.
River Oaks Elementary School Nature Center
2008 Kirby Dr, Houston 77019

Saturday, May 9, 2026, 8:30 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.
Tomball Farmers Market
205 West Main St, Tomball 77375

Saturday, May 9,, 2026, 9:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.
Grand Parkway Farmers Market
Church of the Holy Apostles
1225 Grand Parkway South, Katy 77494

Saturday, May 16, 2026, 10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.
Mercer Botanic Gardens
22306 Aldine Westfield Rd, Humble 77338

Saturday, May 16, 2026, 10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.
Burroughs Park- Precinct 3 BBQ Event
9738 Huffsmith Rd, Tomball 77375

Saturday, May 18, 2026,. 8:30 a.m. - 11:00 a.m.. Genoa Friendship Garden
1202 Genoa Red Bluff Rd, Houston 77034

Saturday, May 23, 9:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.
Memorial Villages Farmers Market
10840 Beinhorn Rd, Houston 77024

Saturday May 30, 2026, 10:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.
Houston Botanic Gardens
One Botanic Lane, Houston 77017

Saturday, June 6, 2026, 8:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.
Urban Harvest Farmers Market
2752 Buffalo Speedway, Houston 77027

Saturday, June 6, 2026, 10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.
Mercer Botanic Gardens
22306 Aldine Westfield Rd, Humble 77338

Saturday, June 6, 2026, 9:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.
McGovern Centennial Gardens - Family Gardens
1500 Hermann Dr, Houston 77004

Saturday, June 13, 2026, 8:30 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.
Tomball Farmers Market
205 West Main St, Tomball 77375

Saturday, June 13, 2026, 9:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.
Grand Parkway Farmers Market
Church of the Holy Apostles
1225 Grand Parkway South, Katy 77494

Saturday, June 15, 2026,. 8:30 a.m. - 11:00 a.m..
Genoa Friendship Garden
1202 Genoa Red Bluff Rd, Houston 77034

Saturday, June 20, 2026, 10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.
Mercer Botanic Gardens
22306 Aldine Westfield Rd, Humble 77338

Saturday, June 27, 2026, 8:30 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.
Memorial Villages Farmers Market
10840 Beinhorn Rd, Houston 77024

Saturday, June 27, 2026, 5:00 p.m. - 8:00 p.m.
(Special Summer Saturday hours)
Houston Botanic Gardens
One Botanic Lane, Houston 77017

GREEN THUMB

2026 GARDENING SERIES

The Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service and the Harris County Master Gardeners are pleased to offer the Green Thumb Gardening Series of lectures free online.

SECOND MONDAY, 10 A.M. - 11:30 A.M.

HOUSTON CITY COLLEGE @ HOME GARDENING SERIES

Register in advance to get the link: hcc.idloom.events/gardening-series/register

January 12 - Fruit Trees & Berries
February 9 - Spring Vegetable Gardening
May 16 - Weeds in the Garden
June 13 - Texas Superstar Plants
May 11 - Integrated Pest Management
June 8 - Enemies in the Garden
July 13 - Fall Vegetable Gardening
August 10 - Introduction to Permaculture
September 14 - Hooked on Herbs
October 12 - Garden Myths

THIRD TUESDAY, 11 A.M. - NOON

HARRIS COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY ON YOUTUBE

No reservation needed – just visit https://bit.ly/4jo8IWa

January 20 - Fruit Trees & Berries
February 17 - Spring Vegetable Gardening
May 17 - Weeds in the Garden
June 21 - Texas Superstar Plants
May 19 - Integrated Pest Management
June 16 - Enemies in the Garden
July 21 - Fall Vegetable Gardening
August 18 - Introduction to Permaculture
September 15 - Hooked on Herbs
October 20 - Garden Myths

TEXAS MASTER GARDENER TEXAS A&M AGRILIFE EXTENSION Harris County

HARRIS COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY

HOUSTON CITY COLLEGE

TEXAS A&M AGRILIFE EXTENSION

VIEW PAST RECORDINGS AT TXMG.ORG/HCMGA/GREEN-THUMB-SERIES

Vegetable Garden Planting Dates

for Harris County

Texas AgriLIFE Extension Service
Harris County Office
713-274-0950
https://harris.agrilife.org/hort/

Ideal Planting Time | Marginal Planting Time

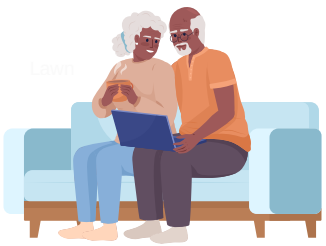
Planting times are for seeds unless otherwise noted	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
Artichoke	Dormant Crowns								Transplants			
Asparagus (dormant crowns)												
Beans - Snap & Lima (Butterbean)			Snap&Lima					Snap				
Beets												
Broccoli (transplants)												
Brussels Sprouts (transplants)												
Cabbage (transplants)												
Cabbage - Chinese (transplants)												
Carrots												
Cauliflower (transplants)												
Chard, Swiss												
Collards (transplants)												
Corn												
Cucumbers												
Eggplant (transplants)												
Garlic												
Kale (transplants)												
Kohlrabi (transplants)												
Leeks	Transplants									Seeds		
Lettuce - also Arugula, Mache, Sorrel												
Melon - Cantaloupe, Honeydew												
Mustard												
Okra												
Onion - bulbing	Transplants									Seeds		
Onion - multiplying/bunching												
Peas - English & Snap												
Peas - Southern												
Pepper (transplants)												
Potato - Irish (cut pieces)												
Potato - Sweet (slips)												
Pumpkin												
Radish												
Spinach												
Squash - Summer												
Squash - Winter												
Tomato												
Turnips												
Summer Greens - Malabar, Amaranth												
Watermelon												

Average Last Freeze Dates (Hobby 2/8,Bush 3/1) ↑ ↑ | Average First Freeze Dates (Bush 11/30, Hobby 12/20) ↑ ↑

Plants grown over winter may require protection during freezing weather.

Seeds and transplants started in the heat of summer will benefit from shading during establishment.

Enjoyed this newsletter? Check out the Urban Dirt Index here to discover our past issues with loads of gardening content!



Please help Harris County Master Gardeners continue providing gardening education with a donation

THANK YOU!

Back to Table of Contents