

May 2018

Volume 10, Issue 2



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Official Newsletter of the Jefferson County Master Gardeners

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Agent's Two Cents *David Oates, Horticulture Agent*

The spring season in Jefferson county has been mild this year as compared to others. It sees that this season has been wet and downright cold (yes even a few snow days as well) when compared to others that we have had in the past. Master Gardeners have put their best foot forward this spring despite the weather setbacks that have seemed to abound over the last couple of months. The Master Gardener group has risen to the challenge of maintaining a program of great educational and community outreach activities this spring. With a successful spring vegetable sale and an outstanding Spring Market Day plant sale behind them, plans are already in the works for upcoming activities in the following months. Hours of hard work and dedication go into every program or activity that is executed and presented by the Jefferson County Master Gardeners. There is a lot of preparation for all these programs that are put together, plus all the behind the scenes work that sometimes is overlooked and forgotten about.

So, if you see a fellow Master Gardener around the office, working in the test garden or working on a program or presentation, take a few minutes to stop and give them a well-deserved pat on the back for all their hard work and dedication to the Master Gardener program.

Looking forward to a great 2018 program with the Master Gardeners.

Meetings are the second Thursday of each month, 6pm in the Extension Office Auditorium

Upcoming Meeting Dates:

May 10 - Dr. Bart Foster, Hot Topics in Pest Control

June 14 — TBA

July 12 — No Meeting ??

Summer Lawn Maintenance

By Eileen Slater, JCMG, President

Fresh cut grass is a wonderful summertime smell! Summer lawn care maintenance in the stifling humidity and heat is not so wonderful.

Safety is a key issue when working in the yard. Working outside means you are fully hydrated to prevent heat stroke. Take shade breaks. Wear appropriate shoes that cover your feet and a hat to protect your head. Sunglasses provide protection for your eyes, and sunscreen will protect your skin from harmful UV sun-rays.

Mow every 5-7 days at recommended heights. The best time to mow is late afternoon to prevent additional stress on the plant after being cut. The plant will have time to recover during the night without the hot sun beating down on it. The most common and best shade tolerant grass in our area is St. Augustine. It needs to stand 3 inches tall in the summer to promote root growth and to protect the plant roots from the hot summer sun. Remove only 1/3 of the leaf at a time to prevent sunburn. Lawns cut too short are turning brown, even under shade trees.

Leave your grass clippings on the lawn to return valuable nutrients into the soil. No need to fertilize if the grass clippings are left in the grass.

Your lawn mower needs sharp blades to cut grass. Blades should be sharpened after 30 hours of mowing or approximately once a year. Sharpen more frequently if you run over things in your lawn that would dull the blade. Buy new blades if sharpening is not an option. Dull blades promote fungal diseases and the jagged edges tear the leaf edges unevenly. The leaf edges turn brown. This gives your lawn a browner appearance overall.

One inch of water is needed weekly in the summer. Rain falls of at least ½ inch count toward this total. Clay soils need multiple soakings for shorter runs to achieve 6-8 inches of water absorption into

the soil. Additionally, this technique prevents water runoff. The depth of water absorption can be checked by inserting a screwdriver, soil probe or garden spade into the soil.

Grass is ready for water again when the leaves are a dull bluish color, have rolled or folded leaves, or leave footprints that do not spring back. Water before 9:00 a.m. Watering in the middle of the day will result in water evaporation, and watering late in the afternoon encourages the spread of diseases. Overwatering promotes disease problems; light watering promotes a shallow root system.

Your family will enjoy a wonderful lush, fragrant lawn when you follow these helpful tips!



TMG State Conference



Melissa Starr and Eileen Slater receive Earth Kind Specialist Certificates



Congratulations to Joyce Logan, Third Place, Outstanding Individual Master Gardener-State Level



Standing: Eileen Slater, Ann Lott, Lisa Hitt, Mary Gunter, Joyce Logan; Sitting: Melissa Starr, Pat Tolbert, Judy Starr



Left to right: Melissa Starr, Jerry White, Pat Tolbert, Judy Starr, Joyce Logan, Lisa Hitt, Ann Lott, David Oates, Mary Gunter, Eileen Slater

Fennel

By Micah Shanks, JCMG

If you have ever noticed a plant in a garden that at first appears to be a puff of smoke, more than likely it is bronze fennel. This popular herb can be either bronze or green and has a fern-like growth habit. The entire plant is edible and has a licorice flavor. At maturity, a fennel plant can grow to four feet tall. They are not picky about soil, but do prefer full sun and good drainage.

Dating back to 470 BC, ancient Romans thought that chewing fennel stalks would prevent obesity. In medieval times, it was hung around the house to ward off evil spirits and to invite good luck.

Fennel can be planted in spring or fall. If planting in the fall, do not plant near dill, parsley or carrots as they will cross-pollinate, rendering everything less than tasty. A hardy perennial in most areas, try to harvest fennel seeds before they fall to the ground, then cut the stalks to ground level and let them start over.

The leaves and stalks can be used to flavor many dishes such as fish, the seeds can be added to sausage, and the leaves can be added to salads.

In the butterfly garden, fennel is the host plant for the black swallowtail. The caterpillars have black and yellow bands on green bodies and will strip your plant, so if you are want butterflies, plant a lot of fennel.

Fennel tea is used to soothe indigestion, gas and colic, colds, coughs and sore throats. Make the tea by crushing one teaspoon fennel seeds and steep in one cup boiling water for 10 minutes. The Romans believed this tea can also curb the appetite which, in turn, helps with weight loss.



Vegetable Sale Pictures



Leaf-Footed Stink Bugs

By Melissa Starr, JCMG

After Harvey, there was an explosion of flying insects. One of these pesky bugs is the leaf-footed stink bug. Adult leaf-footed bugs are brown, close to an inch long and their hind legs are shaped like a narrow leaf. The nymph, or younger version of this pest, has a soft body and is an orange-red color. They look a lot like the Assassin bug, a beneficial insect. However, leaf-footed stink bugs in the nymph stage cluster together. It is not an easy task to get rid of these bugs in the garden.

The leaf-footed bug sucks juices from plants and fruit. Its favorite fruit is tomatoes, but it can also cause damage to citrus. Damage can range from discoloration of the rind to dry spots in the fruit itself. Because these bugs tend to gather in one place, sometimes only one citrus tree will have damaged fruit while another tree's fruit is left untouched. Satsumas are their citrus of choice because they ripen early and the rind is thin. Most thick-skinned citrus will not show stink bug damage.

There are several methods to control the leaf-footed bug population. Insecticidal sprays can be used. Our horticulture agent, David Oates, recommends using malathion, permethrin based products or cyfluthrin based products to control adult leaf-footed bugs. If insecticides are used



close to harvest, read the label and follow the "days-to-harvest period" on the product and wash the fruit before eating. If leaf-footed bug nymphs are seen, insecticidal soaps or neem oil can be used. However, they do not kill the adult bugs.

To control leaf-footed bugs organically, some planning is necessary. Overwintering sites, such as woodpiles, should be re-

moved. Weedy areas are also a food source when fruits are not plentiful, so keep weedy areas closely mowed or remove weeds altogether. Leaf-footed bugs can also be physi-

cally removed by hand or with a handheld vacuum. If removed by hand, wear gloves to prevent the stench from getting on hands. Leaf-footed bugs only produce one generation per season, so this method can be helpful if the gardener is persistent.

Hopefully after the cold winter we had, there will not be as many flying around this spring.

Organic Gardening

By Melissa Starr, JCMG

Last month, I attended the Texas Master Gardener state conference at Texas A&M University. There were many excellent speakers, but one class especially caught my attention, "Organic Gardening Practices That Work." This class was taught by Skip Richter who has a master's degree in horticulture from Texas A&M and has been a horticulture county extension agent in Montgomery, Travis, and Harris counties. With all the diseases and insects that we deal with in our area, it was nice to hear about some organic gardening practices that work in Southeast Texas.

In any garden, the key to success is to build great soil. Organic matter is the most important ingredient in great garden soil. When living plants die and then break down into soil or organic matter, they provide the nutrients living plants need to grow. This organic matter allows water to flow through the soil and creates air pockets in the soil for root growth. Compost is the best organic matter to add into the soil; however, you can make your own compost by putting leaves between the rows of your plants and allowing them to break down during the growing season. The next year, you will have compost ready to work into the soil.



Plant choice and location are important to a successful organic garden. Plant your vegetables in a raised bed with good drainage. Standing water is an invitation to insects and disease. Rotate crops and do not plant vegetables of the same family in the same location every year. For example, tomatoes, peppers, and eggplant are in the nightshade family and can easily spread diseases to each other. Choose plants that are resistant to diseases. The tags on tomato plants have letters after the variety of the tomato, such as VFN. These letters represent disease resistance in that tomato variety.

Water and fertilize your plants correctly. When watering, soak the soil around the plant and then let the soil dry out before you water it again. Watch your plants; you don't want them to wilt, so water them before the soil is dry enough for them to wilt. Do not water from above the plant. This spreads more disease and can cause powdery mildew. Drip irrigation is the best method of watering. Good fertilizers to use include fish meal, cottonseed meal, and blood meal, or you can buy an organic fertilizer that is pre-mixed, such as Microlife.

Attract beneficial insects (insects that kill the harmful ones) to your garden with plants such as yarrow, coreopsis, and herbs. Insecticidal soap can help control soft bodied insects like aphids and whiteflies, but must be sprayed on the insect. BT (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) is a good control for caterpillars, but it will also kill any butterfly caterpillars that might be on your plants. Neem oil helps control leaf-eating insects, and spinosad helps control leaf beetles and caterpillars. I have also used spinosad to control ants in my vegetable garden.

Your Health and Safety in the Yard

By Eileen Slater, JCMG

Spring is finally here! Yards and gardens are looking good! But what about that unknown insect bite on your leg from when you were working in your garden? Did you sunburn? Is your skin dry from being outside? Take a moment to think about your health and safety while in the garden.

Begin by protecting yourself from the sun's harmful rays that cause cancer. Use sunscreen on your face, neck, arms and legs. Wear sunglasses to protect your eyes. A wide brimmed hat will protect your face, head and neck area. Long sleeves and pants will keep your skin from becoming too dry.

Other protective gear includes nonslip closed toed shoes to prevent slipping and to protect your feet when mowing the lawn. Use earplugs when running loud garden and lawn equipment. Tuck your pants inside your socks or rubber boots to help prevent insect or spider bites on your legs. Leather gloves protect your hands against cuts and irritants. Avoid loose fitting clothing and jewelry that can entangle in equipment.

Know how to properly use your equipment. Read the directions. Work power tools under dry conditions to prevent electrical shock. Knowing how to turn equipment on and off may save fingers and toes. Unplug and turn off all electrical power tools to keep children safe.

High temperatures can cause serious health problems. Drink water and take plenty of breaks. Rest in shaded areas to allow your body temperature to cool down. Headaches, rapid pulse, dizziness, nausea, confusion or unconsciousness are signs of being out in the heat too long.

Children under the age of 4, people 65 years of age and older and overweight people should be especially careful in heat.

Before mowing your lawn, remove objects that can propel from the

lawnmower blades. Common objects include rocks, sticks, dog bones, toys, sports equipment, metal, glass, and garden tools. These objects can propel at speeds up to 200 miles per hour. Ouch! That would really hurt!

Keep your tools sharp, clean, neat and organized. Insert small garden tools in a closed bucket of sand and old motor oil mixture to keep them clean and rust free.

Keep up the good work in your garden and yard and use your health and safety skills!



The Latest Dirt

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service
1225 Pearl Street, Suite 200
Beaumont, TX 77701

Phone: 409-835-8461
Fax: 409-839-2310
Hotline: 409-835-8742



We're On The Web:

<http://txmg.org/jcmg/>

<http://jefferson.agrilife.org>



MISSION STATEMENT

To encourage and support the horticultural community of Southeast Texas through education and example.

2018 Officers

President—Eileen Slater

Vice President—Jeanene Ebeling

Secretary—Sarah Sloan

Treasurer—Marianne Kirkpatrick

At Large—James Butaud, Joyce Logan, Dorothy Norris

Past President—Tina Gonzales

Announcements

**Rain Water Harvesting Barrel
Making Class**
May 12, 8:30—Noon
\$45, includes constructed barrel
Extension Office Auditorium

**46th Annual Fruit and
Vegetable Show**
June 9 Central Mall
Entries accepted 9-Noon

- ⇒ Garden Workdays
Wednesday and Friday,
9-Noon
- ⇒ Mulching at Test Garden
and Landscaping at
Commissioner's Building
May 9
- ⇒ Landscaping at Veteran's
Memorial Park in Pt.
Arthur 8:30 am May 11
- ⇒ Texas Field Trial Days at
Overton June 28
- ⇒ Beekeeping Seminar 8-
4pm, August 25,
Extension Office