Somervell County Master Gardeners

THE GREEN PIECE

TEXAS A&M AGRILIFE EXTENSION

August 2011

TIPS FOR GARDENING IN AUGUST

By Joan Orr and Nancy Hillin, Somervell County Master Gardeners

This being a severe drought year, the term "die hard" certainly applies to those of us who refuse to give up some type of gardening. Just trying to save our most valuable plants and trees has become a challenge. Here are a few things we can do to give landscapes a chance of making it through this drought. One of the best things we can do to help conserve water is to mulch plants and trees with a 2 to 3 inch layer of mulch. The recommendation for trees for the first three years is to maintain a round mulched area 3 to 4 feet in diameter. Do not mulch too deeply because roots can not get the oxygen and carbon dioxide movement in and out of the soil. Six inches is the maximum recommendation. It is best to water your plants between sundown and sunrise. When possible install a drip irrigation system. Fertilization is not recommended for anything in our landscapes during this drought.

If you have to be out in the hottest part of the day, hydrate yourself before, during and after working in the garden. Heat exhaustion can take over quickly in this extreme heat. Wear loose fitting clothing and a wide-brim hat for greater protection. Of course, sun screen protection and sun glasses should be used when outside for extended periods.

Take advantage of local education events such as the Community Horticultural Education Series held at the Senior Citizens Center in Glen Rose on the second Monday of the month not including July and December. Seasoned professionals will offer suggestions of the most drought tolerant and Earth-Kind plants for this area.

Think about making changes to your landscape that will be more conservative in water usage and maintenance. Limit the amount of lawn grass in your yard and replace it with beds of native or xeriscape plants. Learn how to save rain water through a rain water harvesting system for your landscape and for your home usage. Master Gardener Rain Water Specialists are frequent speakers at the Community Horticultural Education meetings as previously mentioned. You can learn how to harvest water at your home through this tried and proven system with very little effort. This could save you money and your landscape in times of inclement weather. This will let you be prepared for when the rain does come and allow you to water your landscape when needed.

Source: Doug Welsh's Texas Garden Almanac

THE OBEDIENT PLANT

By Joan Orr and Nancy Hillin, Somervell County Master Gardeners

Common Name/ Scientific Name: Obedient Plant/ Physostegia Viginiana
Native/Adaptive: Native perennial wildflower
Height: 24 to 36 inches
Spread: Aggressive by root and seed
Light: Full sun (6 hours) to partial shade
Evergreen/ Deciduous: This is a deciduous plant
Seasonal Interest: Blooms in August to September
Colors/Features: Lance shaped leaves with showy spikes of lavender pink blooms
Water: Average to damp soil
Maintenance: Dead-head flower stalks to prevent seeding and to encourage rebloom. Prune back in early spring to minimize height and bending.
Wildlife: No serious insect problems. Butterflies love this plant.
Deer: Deer usually will not be attracted to the Obedient plant.
Comments/ Experience with the plant: The Obedient plant is often mistaken for the Snapdragon plant and is also known as False Dragonhead. If you plant this showy perennial in slightly acidic soil and keep it evenly moist, it will multiply and could get out of hand. That being said, it is best to plant it where you really need some color and where you really want it. For the most part, it is very manageable. There is a new variety called "Miss Manners" that is not so aggressive. The individual flowers of this plant will stay in the position you place them in, hence the name, Obedient. It is an outstanding cut flower and lends itself to floral arrangements beautifully. Although it does not resemble some of the mint family, its relatives include the Mints, Salvias, Lavenders and Rosemary.

Source: National Home Gardening Perennials
Pictorial Guide to Perennials
Native Texas Plants

Wade's WallyWorm Word
"BIOCHAR"

WallyWorm, being misled by Wade watering a small portion of the garden, comes to the surface to check on the weather.
"What gives? I can't live in these conditions. It is too hot and dry" exclaims WallyWorm
"I know. I have been watering just enough to keep a few things alive. I even water my rock garden to keep it from turning back to molten lava. Why even the trees are whistling for the dogs and the Methodists are using wet-wipes.
"Well what can we do to help improve these conditions?" asks WallyWorm
"We can't do much about the temperature, but there are ways to "trap" more water in the soil; "BIOCHAR" being a good component." replies Wade
" "BIOCHAR" ? I have never heard of it. What is it and what can it do to help us out?" asks WallyWorm

"Well hang on WallyWorm, because this is going to take a while. "BIOCHAR" is a new word, created in 2008, to describe charcoal properly prepared to enhance the soil. Although the practice of adding charcoal to the soil was practiced by the indigenous people in the South American Amazon Basin for 6000 years, it is a new concept in these "modern" times. European "influence" diminished the 25 million or so inhabitants of the Amazon Basin by 90% and their carbon rich soils reverted from cropland to forests. The carbon dioxide required for this tremendous regrowth was taken from the atmosphere. This depletion of CO2 initiated a global cooling which was a factor of the "Little Ice Age" in Europe from 1550 to 1750." continued Wade
" "BIOCHAR" is created by "burning" biomass and at the same time isolating it from oxygen. This can be done by externally heating the biomass and just letting the gases escape. By preventing actual combustion of the biomass, carbon is captured as charcoal, reduced to char. This char or "BIOCHAR", incorporated into the soil, will remain there for centuries. This is a good thing.
By increasing the "BIOCHAR" content of the soil, absorption of water is enhanced. "BIOCHAR" is very light because it is full of holes or micropores and weighs only about 1/6 the weight of sand. The micropores are like sponges and soak up water. Soil "treated" with "BIOCHAR" resists drying out. "BIOCHAR" being located between soil granules insulates the electrical attraction of the granules and curtails stickiness and tight dense soil structure. A "BIOCHAR" enhanced soil structure can more easily open, soften, have looser tilth, texture, airflow and water penetration. "BIOCHAR" is not consumed by the soil microbes. Instead, "BIOCHAR" becomes the residences, storehouses, strongholds, larders, and cisterns for the microbes. By reducing the particle size, "BIOCHAR" can be incorporated by blending with compost. "BIOCHAR" can also be sprayed with compost tea, a biodynamic preparation, or EM culture (a microbial consortia)." continues Wade
"Say buddy, I need to take a break. Let's continue this conversation later when we can think about something other than the weather." interrupts WallyWorm
"Fine with me. I need to get out of this heat. I'll be back in a few more weeks and fill you in on a few more bits of information on "BIOCHAR"." concludes Wade

This information was sweated out of an article by David Yarrow in the March and May issues of Acres USA.

Yes – Another Drought Article!

By Donna Hagar, Somervell County Master Gardener

Everywhere you turn these days, people are complaining about the heat and dry. For obvious reasons! We are on track to break just about all records for days with temperatures above 100 degrees and days without significant rain fall. All living things, plants, wildlife, humans and even the soil itself, are adversely affected by these conditions.

There is already one article within this newsletter with tips of how to deal with some of your garden issues during these times of undue stress. And there are many more suggestions in just about every gardening journal, website, newsletter, blog, etc. out there. Hopefully without being too overly redundant (ha, already did), expanding on some of these items and adding a few more tidbits might just be helpful.

Mulch – Starting with mulch can never be the wrong way to go. For best results, water thoroughly, before placing that 3 inch layer of mulch on top. The mulch itself will most likely be dry, too, and if you try to water on top of it, the mulch will drink up most of that much needed moisture.

Water – Duh, no need for repetition here. Just remember to water slowly and deeply without allowing the water to run-off. The deeper the soil is moist, the deeper the roots will grow, insulating them from the hot and dry. And be careful not to over-water, too. In this heat, plants can close their pores to conserve moisture. And when they do, they wilt. Tomatoes are notorious for this during the intense heat of the summer, no matter how moist the soil. Use the best water meter on the market, your finger, to determine if you need more moisture!

DO NOT PRUNE – Pruning, and fertilizing for that matter, will encourage new growth. Tender new growth will literally fry in this dry heat. Allow your plants to take a rest from growing and just survive. There will be time for pretty green later!

Let there be SHADE – Move all container plants into some shaded protection, particularly in the afternoon. Containers themselves will act like ovens and bake the roots of your plants. And water every day, maybe twice if needed. Construct some sort of shade cloth for your permanent garden beds during the afternoon "microwaving" and they will fair a bit better.

Do NOT Plant ANYTHING – If you have taken advantage of those awesome clearance sales from nurseries trying to save on their water bills, good for your pocket book – but not so good for the plants. Even watering newly planted plants regularly will be a struggle. The ground is so dry that much of the moisture you give to your new plants will be wicked away by the surrounding dry earth. If you do have container plants that are busting at the seams, repot them into larger pots until September or early October. Give them shade protection as mentioned above and keep them watered. Remember – Fall is the best time to plant anyway.

And just be patient. One day, some day, we will all be singing, "Rain, rain, go away, come again another day". Just be sure you have your rainwater harvesting system ready!!!