

*Somervell County Master Gardeners*

***THE GREEN PIECE***

TEXAS A&M  
AGRI LIFE  
EXTENSION



December 2011

## **RECOVERING FROM A TEXAS WILDFIRE**

By Jim Cheatham, Somervell County Master Gardener

As everyone resident in Texas couldn't but be aware, the spring and summer of 2011 were marked by both record droughts and temperatures that resulted in equally record setting wildfires throughout much of the State, particularly in the north central region. I live on a ranch that was an early (March 11) victim of a wildfire that had originated in a "prescribed burn" on a neighboring ranch. Fanned by 35 mph winds it quickly got out of control and consumed some 4,000 acres of forest and pastures in northern Bosque and southern Somervell Counties before being extinguished by several local fire departments with the aid of a helicopter of the Texas Parks and Forestry Service.

My property consists of some 210 acres roughly half of which are pasture and the other half woodland, little of which could be profitably used for other purposes. It is configured roughly in the shape of a square, the upper portion of which consists of high hills that descend sharply toward a plain bisected by Hill Creek. Until eleven years ago it was a cattle ranch supporting up to a dozen or so head, or about the number sufficient to satisfy the tax exemption for land used for agricultural purposes. Overgrazing had greatly degraded the quality of the pastures, and at that time it was decided to apply for an exemption under a wildlife conservation program. This entailed the excavation of a substantial pond and sowing 17 acres in "noble" grasses—side oats grama, Indian grass, big and little bluestem, switch grass and prairie clover. Establishing suitable habitat in the 17 acres went reasonably well. At the same time, with the elimination of livestock and the institution of a brush control program, other pastureland gradually recovered and native grasses, particularly Indian grass, little bluestem and bushy bluestem, were re-establishing themselves.

The fire wrought changes in the pre-existing distribution of plants, some of which were desirable, some not so desirable. Junipers had made up to 90 percent of the trees on the ranch; the wildfire destroyed many and many of the rest are dying. New growth has been delayed by at least a year, hence opening a window for the reestablishment of hardwoods, in particular various native oak species. Late blooming wildflowers, such as bluebells, goldenrod, snow-on-the mountain, Illinois bundle flower and gay feather thrived as never before, the latter attracting monarch butterflies in their southern migration in numbers I had never seen before on this ranch. Less happily, some native grasses almost altogether failed to appear in the spring of 2011, notably, little bluestem and bushy bluestem. Presumably, their reappearance was delayed by the severe drought that ravaged other desirable plant life as well during the summer of 2011. Undesirable forbs such as greenbrier, chittimwood, sumac, poverty weed, Johnson grass and yucca hardly missed a beat from the wildfire. Well-honed tools applied energetically will, hopefully, render them less evident by early spring.

As was to be expected, the loss of desirable plant life has impacted animal life. Snakes, mice and voles seemed to have virtually disappeared, at least temporarily, as evidenced by the absence of such familiar raptors as northern harriers, red tail hawks and great horned owls. Less ground cover is translating into fewer wintering small birds, especially several species of sparrows. With abundant fall rains, however, most of those familiar species will return in 2012 along with a bumper crop of spring bloomers.

## **POINTERS FOR POINSETTIAS**

By Marilyn Cranford, Somervell County Master Gardener

Since the weather has cooled and the calendar says it's December, one of the flowers we all look forward to this time of year is the poinsettia. They are beautiful and enhance the looks of any home or office. But sadly, they only last for just a short time. However, here are a few tips you might try if you would like to coax your poinsettia to bloom again for another year:

- Christmas: Pick a colorful plant with tightly clustered yellow buds. Protect it from hot or cold drafts, water when dry and place in a room with enough natural light for reading.
- New Year's: Apply fertilizer. Continue light and water. The plant should remain colorful for many weeks.
- Valentine's Day: If your plant has become long and leggy, prune to 5 inches from the soil.
- St. Patrick's Day: Remove faded and dried parts of the plant. Add more soil, preferably a commercially-available sterile mix.
- Memorial Day: Trim off two or three inches from the ends of branches, to promote side branching. Repot to larger container. Move plant outside – first to indirect, then direct light.
- Fourth of July: Trim plant again. Make sure it has full sunlight. Slightly increase the amount of fertilizer.
- Labor Day: Move the plant indoors, but make sure it has six hours of direct light from an uncurtained window. Reduce fertilizer.
- First Day of Autumn: Starting on or near Sept. 21, give plant 13 hours of uninterrupted darkness and 11 hours of bright light per day. Keep night temperatures in the lower 60s. Continue to water and fertilize. Rotate plant each day to give all sides even light.
- Thanksgiving: Discontinue day/night treatment. Put plant in a sunny area. Reduce water and fertilizer. Then wait for those beautiful blooms to reappear. I've tried to "save" many poinsettias, but this is the only method that works for me. Good Luck!!

## **December Garden Tips**

**By Sandi Stringer, Somervell County Master Gardener**

As you begin to winterize your gardens, lawns, and trees, look around and see which plants have done well this past year. Not only have we been through a record drought, we also had record-breaking cold temperatures with snow and ice in February. That being said, you can probably safely say plants that survived the entire year are "keepers". Forecasters are also saying that La Nina, which was the cause of our drought, will continue on into 2012. So plant wisely and don't forget to mulch, both for winter and summer!

### **Bulbs**

Daffodils can be planted now thru mid January and do not require pre chilling. Some well-adapted ones for our area are: Ice Follies, Carlton, & Fortune. These are easy to grow, don't require a lot of special attention or water and are spring bloomers. Other bulbs such as tulips, hyacinths, & crocus need pre chilling and can be planted in late Dec. and January

### **Lawns**

As the leaves continue to fall, just mow them and leave the clippings on the lawn or you can rake them up and spread in flowerbeds or add to your compost pile. Check on your landscape for water stress during dry spells, water when needed. Can apply a broadleaf weed killer but do so when daytime temps. are in the 70's.

### **Pruning**

## **Trees**

Pruning of trees is generally not advised this month, wait until late winter, just prior to the onset of new growth. Replenish mulch

## **Shrubs**

Major pruning of shrubs should be done in Feb. although selective trimming of limbs can be done now. Evergreen plants such as hollies, Indian hawthorns, junipers and ligustrums that have died this past summer are not going to come back, clean them out now so you can replant either immediately or in the spring

## **Perennials**

This is a list of some popular ones that you might have.

Continue deadheading (snipping old blooms) perennials until we have a hard freeze

- Purple Coneflower, Black-Eyed Susan, Shasta, & Oxe-eye Daisies: prune spent flowers to the ground
- Salvia Greggii give it a slight hair cut if blooming has slowed, save heavy pruning for Feb.
- Mexican Bush Sage, Mexican Mint Marigold, Chrysanthemums, Russian Sage, Lantana, Zexmenia: after heavy freeze, cut to the ground and mulch to protect thru the winter
- Fall Aster: can cut to the ground after a freeze or wait until mid Feb.
- Day Lilies pull off brown foliage
- Hardy Hibiscus: after freeze, cut stems to the ground and mulch
- Blackfoot Daisy, Calylophus, Pink Skullcap, Dianthus, 4-nerve Daisy: no need to prune
- Dwarf Mexican Petunia (Katie's Ruellia): after a freeze, on a dry day, just stomp on them and break the stems off at the ground & remove brown foliage
- Ornamental grasses: after a hard freeze, the grasses will turn tan, but just leave them alone until Feb. They add texture & interest in the garden during the winter
- Columbine: they should start putting on new growth as the weather turns cooler, are evergreen during the winter and bloom in the spring
- Powis Castle Artemisia: wait until Feb. to cut it back
- Ferns: Holly Ferns & Autumn Ferns are evergreen, don't cut back. Wood Ferns & Japanese Painted Ferns will turn brown after a freeze, cut them to the ground & mulch

Sources: Texas Gardener Magazine, Texas Gardener Almanac, Neil Sperry Articles

## Wade's WallyWorm Word BD 501

Instead of sugarplums dancing in Wade's head, he still has a noggin of numbers numbing his nonsense. To lighten the load a little he tunes in on WallyWorm's tunnel and pours out a continuance of last month's topic of biodynamic recipes.

"Oh Wally, WallyWorm, I've brought you tidings of another formative force recipe; BD 501. Remember BD500 being a formative force associated with gravity? Well, BD 501 is a formative force associated with levity." Wade starts out

"BD 501 is prepared by placing finely ground silica flour, packed into female cow horns and buried in fertile soil for the summer months. The silica flour is produced by crushing quartz crystals into tiny pieces and then grinding these pieces between two pieces of heavy glass to produce a very fine white powder. This powder is stored in a glass jar in a protected well lit location such as a window sill.

One gram of BD 501, mixed with 3 gallons of water in a five gallon bucket, is enough to treat one acre. The same stirring procedure is used as with BD 500; creating a vortex and then reversing the stir to create a vortex in the other direction, continuing the chaos for one hour. Apply BD 501 in the early morning, preferably the next morning after a BD 500 treatment since the two forces compliment each other. Apply BD 501 in a very fine mist, ergo the straining out of the silica flour from the mix may be required to prevent clogging of the spray nozzle." continued Wade

"Why would a human being go to that much trouble? All that prepping and waiting has to have some benefit; what gives?" asks WallyWorm

"Well, remembering that BD 500 is associated with downward forces and BD 501 is associated with levity forces, the combination of the two treatments can be a stimulating benefit to certain grain and grass crops. Fruit production is also enhanced. Flavor and nutritional value is improved and a resistance to insects and diseases is also a benefit. The low cost of making BD 500 and BD 501, coupled with their enhancement of increased and healthier production, make for a winning combination." concludes Wade Saucered and blowed from "A BIODYNAMIC FARM for growing wholesome food" by Hugh Level