

Williamson County Master Gardener

Journal

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Dedicated to growing with Williamson County

JUNE 2010

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The President's Corner

Winola Van Artsdalen

June was the lull before the storm, and it is now time for all Master Gardeners to really get humming! July has two big JMG projects, and our new Master Gardener class begins next month. Around 35 children are expected in Hutto for three fun-filled days of gardening learning fun, July 12-14, from 8 am-4 pm. This is a community activity with the Hutto Methodist Church allowing us use of their facility. Our sincere appreciation to them as well as all of you who have been gathering resources and ideas to prepare for this event. It will be time well spent for the difference it can make in the lives of these children.



The following week, on July 20-22, will be the JMG Teachers' class. This is an especially important activity, as it is our opportunity to not just teach gardening information but to encourage these teachers to use JMG gardening activities as a part of their curriculum. From my own personal experience of gardening with my students, I promise you this is a great opportunity to win these children to gardening for life!

We have been most fortunate to have Juanita James continue to be our committee chair for JMG this year. Her leadership is so quiet you could almost miss noticing all the work she does to keep this important part of Master Gardeners organized. Juanita will be the first to tell you how much she enjoys working with Brigid Mejia in the county Agri-LIFE office. Brigid is extremely conscientious, works far beyond what is required, and is superb working with teachers, children and all Master Gardeners. We are most grateful to both Juanita and Brigid for all they do for us. If you would like to be a part of this team, just watch for the next JMG meeting and come be a part of the excitement.

Summer Gardening

What can I say? IT'S HOT! Do your best to help yourself as well as your plants survive the heat. Set the alarm, if you must, but get out there at daybreak working a little each day that you are home. Catch those weeds before they get entrenched and remember to deadhead old blooms to keep those new blooms coming!

We had a massive invasion of wooly aphids in my neighborhood. Yes, you could just ignore them, but, though I am no bug expert, when I see those white stringy masses appearing, I know some little critter wants to take some nutrition from my precious plants. (If you will cut a bit of the branch with affected leaves and seal it in a plastic baggie, the insect will soon appear, moving around in the bag. Wooly aphids are white, flat little insects that you can probably recognize from one of your insect books.) We began with the most earth-friendly approach—a blast from the garden hose. After blasting small plants, bushes, and trees morning and evening for a couple of days the enemy gave up and left. Success!

Though you can plant a new purchase that is growing in a container at any time, try to hold off new planting until fall. If you find a treasure you simply must plant now, be sure to mulch well and be prepared to water every day the first few weeks, possibly even until the end of summer.

There are late summer and fall blooming annuals for which you can put out seed now like portulaca and cosmos. Some perennials need to rest a bit during the hot summer, so be patient. Be sure to watch for plants you see in other yards that take the summer heat well, so you can possibly make some changes in your own landscape for next year. The excitement of future plans will help you make it through the rest of the long, hot summer.

Gardening Tips from Marlyn Hooper

It is Texas. It is hot. The rain was wonderful, but it is probably over for a while. I repeat - it is hot! Want to avoid heatstroke? Remember, the three rules for Central Texas gardeners:

- a. Wear effective sunscreen and a large brimmed hat.
- b. Garden early in the morning.
- c. Drink gallons upon gallons of water!

Harvest your herbs for drying as soon as they flower. Bundle them up with a rubber band and hang them in a dark, dry place with good air circulation. To preserve the best flavor once they are dry, store the herbs in an airtight container away from heat and light.

Change the water in your birdbaths regularly and keep them filled. Remember to fill up your bird feeders. We need to take care of our feathered friends.

Use vines to create vertical interest in the garden. If you don't have a wall or fence on which to train them, a lattice or arbor will work. Not much work, but great results!

Cleanup tip: To remove salt residue from crusty pots and to clean dirty tools, scrub with a mixture of 1/3 white vinegar, 1/3 rubbing alcohol, and 1/3 water. Worn-out toothbrushes make great scrubbers for small cleanup tasks.

Let your landscape rest. We are entering our least productive season for planting here in Central Texas, except for the toughest summer vegetables. Accordingly, the planting recommendations are slim this month. Your best bet is to survive through the heat while you plan for your fall garden. Sit back and stay in the cool house. If you are new to Texas, our heat and our special gardening needs, there is hope. It will get cool again. We call it January!!

Helpful Hints

Gnats Be Gone

Patty Hoenigman

If you're seeing a few tiny flying gnats, there are probably dozens more. I've been using this with great success! It has worked by fruit bowls and house plants alike.

Put 1/2 inch of apple cider vinegar in a small bowl with 2 drops of liquid soap...that's it! Set the bowl out any place where you're being bothered by those pesky flying no-see-ums. They will be drawn to the scent of the vinegar and die!

Tick Time

Submitted by Susan Blackledge

Summer is here, and the ticks will soon be showing their heads. Here is a good way to get them off you, your children, or your pets. Give it a try.

A School Nurse has written the info below -- good enough to share -- And it really works!!

I had a pediatrician tell me what she believes is the best way to remove a tick. This is great, because it works in those places where it's some times difficult to get to with tweezers: between toes, in the middle of a head full of dark hair, etc.

Apply a glob of liquid soap to a cotton ball. Cover the tick with the soap-soaked cotton ball and swab it for a few seconds (15-20), the tick will come out on its own and be stuck to the cotton ball when you lift it away. This technique has worked every time I've used it (and that was frequently), and it's much less traumatic for the patient and easier for me. Unless someone is allergic to soap, I can't see that this would be damaging in any way. I even had my doctor's wife call me for advice because she had one stuck to her back and she couldn't reach it with tweezers. She used this method and immediately called me back to say, "It worked!"

Azaleas at the Dallas Arboretum

Beth Blankenship

I was about a week late to see the tulips in bloom at the Dallas Arboretum this spring. As you can see in these photos, the azaleas were still so gorgeous that I was inspired to do some research to learn more about them.

Azaleas are flowering shrubs in the genus *rhododendron*. There are deciduous and evergreen varieties; they generally do not much need much sun and will often do well under trees. They prefer slightly acid soil (4.5 to 6.0) with good drainage in a cool, shady area. Heavy soil should be mixed with organic



matter such as fine pine bark or rotted leaves. Many varieties will grow in USDA Zone 7 to 9, with minimum winter temperatures of 0°F. Heat tolerance is another consideration, however, as many deciduous azalea hybrids are not tolerant of high heat for extended periods, particularly when it is warm at night. Azalea plants are toxic to horses, sheep and goats, but apparently do not cause problems for the deer and rabbits that like to graze on them.

Azaleas have been cultivated for hundreds of years, and there are over 10,000 varieties—including 16 deciduous varieties that are native to North America. They are generally propagated via cuttings but can be grown from seed. The size range is huge--some plants are the size of small trees, but groundcover plants less than 12 inches tall are available too. The bloom time of azaleas varies quite a bit, depending on the variety and on the weather. In cooler climates a few varieties bloom as early as March, most bloom in April and May, and some bloom in June through September. Most of the blooms appear at the same time and last about two weeks. In southern climates they



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sometimes bloom again in the fall. Evergreen azalea flowers range from white to purple to red (no yellow), where as deciduous plant colors range from white to pink, and from yellow to orange and red.



I've concluded that our alkaline soils, hot summers, and hungry deer population make the azalea a less than ideal shrub candidate for my front yard foundation plantings, so I will be content to visit them in the spring! Tyler has an eight mile azalea trail; Nacogdoches boasts the largest Azalea Garden in Texas, and during its two week long festival in March and early April there are over 20 miles of trails through residential districts. The Dallas Arboretum is located on the shores of White Rock Lake in Dallas, and is a great place to visit any time of year.



Recipes from the Garden

Healthy Basil Sauce (no cheese or nuts!)

Patty Hoenigman

Ingredients

A good handful of basil leaves

1/4 tsp salt

2 swirls around with lemon juice and olive oil (about 3 Tbsp each)

Place the ingredients in a food processor. Zap until it's very soupy, adding a bit of water as necessary.

This sauce is fabulous and so versatile! Slather it under the skin of chicken breasts a few hours before grilling. It's great on fish too. Use it on toast for breakfast, with crackers for an afternoon snack or on scoops for a fancier appetizer with a dollop of tapenade. It's so tasty your mouth lights up with flavor! And no heavy fat in it like pesto has! It keeps in the refrigerator, but not for long with me in the house!

Monthly Meetings

Williamson County Master Gardeners hold monthly meetings at the Williamson County Extension Office, 3151 SE Innerloop Road, Suite A, Georgetown on the second Monday of each month at 6:30pm. Master Gardeners and the public are welcome to attend.

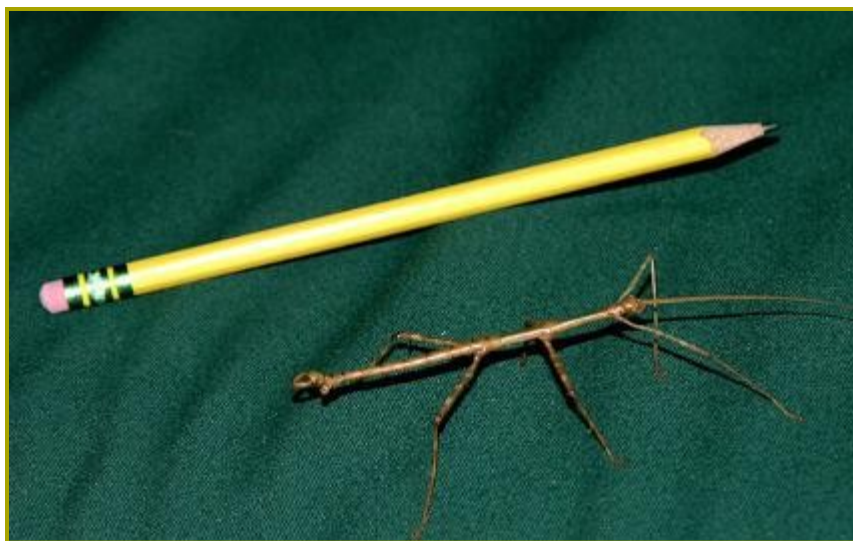
Bugs in the Garden

Walking Sticks

Patty Hoenigman

As soon as our patio was enlarged, the four inch pots started showing up and began encroaching on the area where "normal" folks have dining room tables. I'm propagating succulents using all the pots I can get, and when I run out of room, the trash can lids give me a great expanse to start a hundred leaves at a time! Maybe it's this taste of nature that has begun to lure some curious bugs to the patio. Most recently, a walking stick showed up on the chaise lounge. It hung out there for well over an hour without even moving, allowing my husband to take this close up of it. It's a bug I've heard of all my life, but don't think I've ever had that intimate an experience with one. They look really cool!

You can see from the photo that it was very long. They can get up to 10 inches in length! They don't have any wings and are known for being slow moving or motionless. They mate in August, depositing black eggs that hatch mid-summer. Walking Sticks live on fruit trees, in grassy vegetation and on shrubs and trees, according to my *Texas Bug Book* by Garret & Beck, which is a great book to add to your collection, if you don't already have a copy.



These critters can eat plants but aren't considered destructive enough to warrant waging war against them; let the birds, flies and parasitic wasps control them naturally. Some stick insects spray chemical defenses that can be unpleasant...so the authors warn not to handle these insects close to your face. Evidently some people even keep them as pets!! They're almost big enough to throw a saddle on and ride into the sunset!

Plant Wonders

The Adaptable Plant

Christine Powell

Naturalists are used to the idea that animals can adapt their behavior to respond to changes in their environment. This is not just a human phenomenon, however. Recent research shows that plants can have this same ability to respond to environmental stimuli by making behavioral changes that enhance their survival rates and reproductive success. Danny Kessler, Celia Diezel, and Ian T. Baldwin of the Max Planck Institute in Jena, Germany, recently described a case in point.

A native tobacco plant from the American Southwest, *Nicotiana attenuata*, normally produces flowers that bloom at night to attract hawkmoths that are active then. The flowers release benzyl acetone as a scent attractant for the moths, which are a primary pollinator for the species. The fly (or moth) in the ointment is that the tobacco hornworm is a principal insect pest on the plants... and these are the larval form of the pollinating hawkmoths. Unlike many other insects, the hornworms are immune to the alkaloid poison, nicotine, produced by the plants. The female moths quite often lay eggs as they are gathering nectar, so the plants pollinated by hawkmoths are likely to become the victims of the next generation of hornworms.

Kessler, Diezel, and Baldwin discovered that the tobacco plants have evolved a fascinating defense mechanism. As reported in a recent article in *Current Biology* (20.3:237-242, Jan. 2010), the oral secretions from the larvae as they are feeding trigger changes in the reproductive behavior of the plants. The attacked plants adopt a completely different reproductive strategy. Affected tobacco plants begin producing flowers that bloom in daylight, rather than at night, and that have far less of the benzyl acetone attractant. This dramatically cuts down on the number of visits by moths, hence the eggs laid on the plants, and hence future damage from caterpillars. Instead, the day-blooming plants are pollinated by day-feeding hummingbirds. Because these have wider feeding territories than the moths, the majority of out-crossed tobacco seeds actually come from hummingbird pollination. The plants that are not seriously attacked by the hornworms continue to bloom at night and be pollinated by the hawkmoths.

The article suggests that a number of other observed defensive measures employed by various plants against overzealous herbivores may also be triggered by oral secretions. In addition to the changes in flower phenology observed in the tobacco plants, responses may include direct and indirect defenses as well as toleration responses. This article should inspire citizen scientists such as Master Naturalists to closely observe plant behavior as well as animal behavior to see how it changes and adapts to changes in its environment. Plants may move more slowly than animals, but they are not as static as most of us have imagined. Their behavior can change, and it requires close observation to discover these changes

Nicotiana attenuata — Coyote Tobacco

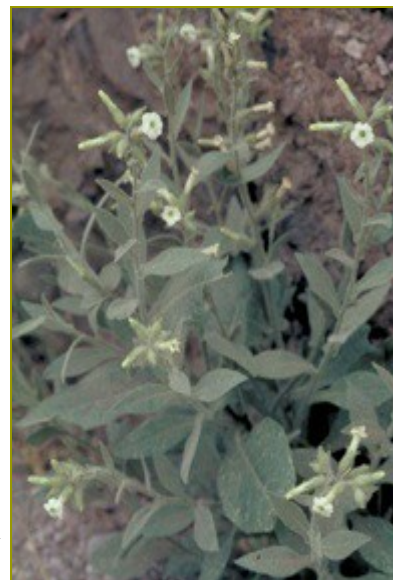
Nicotiana attenuata or Coyote Tobacco is a member of the Nightshade Family (*Solanaceae*) and is a US native plant found in the semi-desert, foothills, openings and woodlands of the American Southwest and far into California. This annual can grow several feet tall or compact and shrub-like. The leaves are long and narrow as are the flowers. The plant is also somewhat hairy and glandular. Touching the plant releases the familiar tobacco smell.

Named by Linnaeus in 1753 for Jean Nicot (1530 – 1600) the French Ambassador to Portugal who in 1560 brought powdered tobacco to France from Portugal. He gave it to the Queen for her son to smoke to cure his migraine headaches. The migraines disappeared, and tobacco was hailed as a cure-all. It quickly became an increasingly social and acceptable pleasure. Columbus had already brought the plant to Europe, in particular Portugal and



Spain, where it had purely been used as an ornamental. In the late 1800's and over the next hundred or so years research showed how deadly smoking was. John Torrey named the *N. attenuata* species in 1871 from a specimen he collected in Nevada. *Attenuata* is from the Latin for "thin or weak."

The Hopi smoke the *Nicotiana attenuate* plant during ceremonial occasions, but it was mixed with other plants and *Nicotinana trigonophylla*. This mixture of plants is known as *Yoyviva* (rain tobacco) or *Omawyviva* (cloud tobacco). The billowing smoke is primarily dispensed from pipes but not inhaled and is thought to be associated with clouds and capable of bringing rain.



Newsletter Submissions

Thank you to those Master Gardeners who submitted articles, pictures, and ideas for this newsletter issue. If you would like to contribute to the *Williamson County Master Gardener Journal*, please send your submissions to Jane Williamson at jawilliamson516@yahoo.com by the 25th of the month. As you garden, volunteer and learn, take a moment to share with other gardeners.

Williamson County Master Gardener Officers for 2010

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