

The Compost Bin

December 2014

**A Publication of the Travis County Master Gardeners
a volunteer program of Texas A&M AgriLife**

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Cover Photo: Austin
Autumn
By Liath Appleton

Right: Back Garden
By Liath Appleton



Dec Meeting - Holiday Party!

Happy Holidays! Come join the fun at the TCMGA Holiday and Recognition Party! Great time to see old friends, eat great food, cheer for award winners, congratulate the new Board members, and introduce yourself to an intern who just became a member! Please RSVP through the sign-up link sent to your inbox.

Car pools of 3 or more people get a chance for a special prize.

Master Gardener Meeting information:
Wednesday, Dec 3, 2014, starting at 7 pm
Zilker Botanical Garden

**Master Gardener meetings are open to certified
Master Gardeners and trainees only.**

In the Vegetable Garden

by Patty Leander



The contrast of lifeless tomato plants against vibrant green broccoli, kale and mustard, reminds us of the incredible diversity of vegetables we can grow in Central Texas.

Last month, just about the time I was debating whether I should pull out my eggplant, okra and cucumbers to make room for additional cool season plantings, an early cold snap came along and made the decision for me. The average first freeze for Central Texas is late November, which means that some years it will come earlier and some years it will come later. This was an early year with a killing freeze on November 13. This changing of the seasons in the vegetable garden, with the contrast of drooping, lifeless okra and tomato plants against vibrant green broccoli, kale and mustard, reminds me of the incredible diversity and variety of vegetables we are blessed to grow throughout the year here in Central Texas. The brisk weather and mild sunshine is invigorating, both physically and mentally, so out with the okra, eggplant, cucumbers and tomatoes, and in with more lettuce, Asian greens, Swiss chard and spinach. These are easy crops to grow

during the winter and they will not require much time or effort during the busy holiday season when the vegetable garden sometimes takes a back seat to other types of "fun".

Here is the vegetable gardener's checklist for December:

- Protect plants from damaging pests, and insulate from freezing weather with a layer of row cover. This can be left on all winter. Anchor the fabric in several places with u-shaped pins, bricks, stones or sandbags. Another option is to lay 4-6 foot lengths of heavy t-posts or wooden boards along the long edge of the row. They are easy to remove if you want to lift up a section of row cover to periodically check the progress of your plants.
- Take some time to sit down with garden notes and graph paper or a computer app and plan your vegetable garden for next year.
- Peruse seed catalogs, and place your order for the spring season.



A year-end harvest of collard greens will be the perfect accompaniment for New Year's Day black-eyed peas.

In the Vegetable Garden

Continued...

- Consider trying one of the following 2014 All-America Selection winners, all compact varieties suitable for containers: 'Mascotte' green bean, available from Park Seed or Harris Seed, 'Patio Baby' eggplant, available from Park Seed or Totally Tomatoes, and 'Pick a Bushel' cucumber, available from Burpee Seeds.
- Grow your own seedlings of broccoli, bok choy, mustard, Swiss chard or other greens so you will have a continual supply of transplants for setting out in January and February. It takes 5-6 weeks to reach transplant size, so plan accordingly.
- Say goodbye to your basil (if you haven't already done so) and plant some cool weather, fuss-free herbs like cilantro, parsley, oregano, sage or winter savory.
- Keep your vegetable consumption high this winter as you continue to harvest Swiss chard, kale, collards and lettuce. The Organic Seed Alliance recommends the green and white varieties of chard, such as 'Fordhook Giant', over the red-stemmed varieties for cold tolerance.
- Cut or twist the leafy tops off of turnips, beets, radishes and carrots before storing, and don't overlook the culinary potential of those leafy greens. They are totally edible and nutritious, especially when harvested fresh from the garden. They may have a bitter bite when eaten unadorned in their natural state, but their flavor is transformed when chopped up and incorporated into soups, casseroles, vegetable sautés or dips.
- Be sure to eat a hearty bowl of black-eyed peas (for good luck) and collard greens (for prosperity) on New Year's Day, and let's hope that 2015 will be a blessed and prosperous year.

Left: 'Bilko' Chinese cabbage is easy to grow, cold tolerant and a great addition to stir-fry.

Right: The Organic Seed Alliance recommends this green and white chard called 'Fordhook Giant' over the red-stemmed varieties for cold tolerance.



In the Vegetable Garden

Continued...



Enjoy the tops and the roots of carrots, beets, radishes and turnips.

Photos by Bruce Leander.

Mode of Action of Some Naturally Derived Pesticides

by Wizzie Brown

While many people utilize pesticides to help manage a variety of insect pests, they may not always know how the pesticides work. Knowing the mode of action can help the pesticide user to make more sound decisions about which pesticide to use in a particular situation.

Insecticidal soap is commonly made of potassium salts of fatty acids and works only on contact with pests, leaving little to no residual on plants once the product is dry. This product works by disrupting the structure and permeability of the cell membranes, and causes cell contents to leak from damaged cells leading to death. Insecticidal soaps are most effective on small, soft bodied insects and may cause phytotoxicity on some plants (check label before using).

Diatomaceous earth/ silicon dioxide/ silica gel all are made from crushed shells of diatoms (small, single-celled algae). These products act as a desiccant, and remove the waxy coating found on insects leading to water loss and death. These also work best on soft-bodied insects.

Horticultural oils are usually made from highly refined petroleum oil or vegetable oils. There are two kinds, dormant - to be used when plants are NOT growing - and summer or year-round oils to be used during the growing season. Summer/year-round oils tend to be lighter than dormant oils. Horticultural oils work by coating the insect or eggs with oil and smothering them. Oils tend to work well on small, soft-bodied insects. Before using horticultural oils, check the label for phytotoxicity of certain plants.

Sulfur is one of the oldest known pesticides that is still used today. The mode of action is unknown, but the product is typically used for disease control as well as to control mites, psyllids and thrips. Take caution when using sulfur in hot, dry weather, as plant damage can occur. Sulfur should not be used with horticultural oils. The combination can kill plants.

Azadirachtin (neem) works as a feeding deterrent and a growth regulator. The growth regulator effect makes the insect unable to molt into the next life stage leading to its death. Azadirachtin is derived from the seeds of the neem tree. This product does not have a quick knock down and kill of insects. It also has some local systemic properties (the chemical is taken into the plant tissue). Azadirachtin has a low mammalian toxicity and begins to degrade once it dries.

For more information or help with identification, contact Wizzie Brown, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service Program Specialist at 512.854.9600. Check out my blog at www.urban-ipm.blogspot.com

Meet the Master Gardeners: Mikala McFerren, class of 2011

by Jean Love El Harim



Mikala in the Green Room at the Garden Center
Photo by Jean El Harim

"I am a wife of 36 years and a former homeschooling mom," Mikala summarizes her background. "We have five grown children and three grandchildren." Mikala was born and raised in Dallas and says she was "a latchkey kid. Both my parents worked." In 1977, Mikala came to Austin to go to college, but then met and married her husband who was just joining the Navy. They spent four years in Italy and then moved often over the next two decades. In 2000, they came back to Austin and have lived here ever since "on the Bastrop County line, as far east as you can go and still be in Travis County. That's the longest time I have ever lived in one place."

Mikala says she spends her days "gardening, of course, and spoiling my husband and my grandkids, helping with my husband's businesses, babysitting grandkids, and visiting people." Mikala works as a booking agent for a babysitting service and enjoys reading, sewing and backyard chickens. "Gardening lovingly takes up so much of my mental energy," she adds, "thinking about gardening, learning about gardening."

Mikala first got interested in gardening when her dad bought acreage in East Texas. "I was about nine years old," she says, "We had cows, fruit trees, and a vegetable garden in the back yard. In East Texas, you just look at the dirt and it grows stuff." Now, she has eight raised beds that are each 50 square feet.

She grows berries, fruits, and a wide variety of vegetables, including butternut squash, cucumbers, tomatoes, eggplant, peppers, okra, watermelon, honeydew melon, ananas melon, sweet potato, green beans, and black-eyed peas. "Next year we want to put in four peach trees," she adds, "and this year we are preparing the soil, growing black-eyed peas and rye grass to improve and loosen the soil. I want to put in an herb garden in the backyard with rosemary, thyme, oregano, and medicinal herbs like calendula and purple coneflower. I like making herbal remedies." Mikala has two compost bins and will be making a third. "I would like to have a self-sustaining lifestyle," she explains her goal, "to grow what we eat."

Mikala's unique talent is that she loves to cook. "Lots of people cook," she says, "but not everybody loves it. I enjoy trying new cuisines: Indian, Thai, Vietnamese. I am vegetarian. I eat my hen's eggs, because I know where they came from. I cook meat for my husband, but I grew up with your basic Texas diet of fried red meat and white gravy, and I have learned that this diet is just not good for me. We don't go out to eat very often, but when we do, we try different kinds of foods from other countries."

When asked about her biggest gardening challenges, Mikala responds, "Getting over my ignorance, and secondly, adapting to the weather patterns and soil here. I wanted to become a Master Gardener to have a more successful garden. One year we would have a great garden and get lots of tomatoes, and the next year it was a failure. Now I know more. I know what causes tomato blossom end rot and blossom drop, and I know what I can do about it." What is her favorite plant? "It's hard to say," she answers. "I love them all. But my favorite flower is the purple coneflower. It's so unassuming, like a daisy. It is beautiful, but calming, not exotic. And yet it has so much power to boost

Meet the Master Gardeners

Continued...

the immune system. And I love to grow and eat tomatoes." What is her favorite gardening tip? "Compost and rotate crops if you have the space," she advises. "That's why we have eight beds and plant cover crops."

A Travis County Master Gardener since 2012, Mikala is currently vice president of Education Programs. She loves helping with new MG recruits training, and is planning on being the new Coordinator for the training program in 2015. Her favorite Master Gardener program "has to be the East Austin Garden Fair," she says. "I love the community outreach and the visibility for our program. I love to help and encourage people who want to help themselves. And I love working with the interns in the intern class. It's always fun to be around people who are excited about something new, discovering things about themselves, about gardening, working together as a team. It's a blessing."

Weeds and Reads: A Gardener's Book Guide

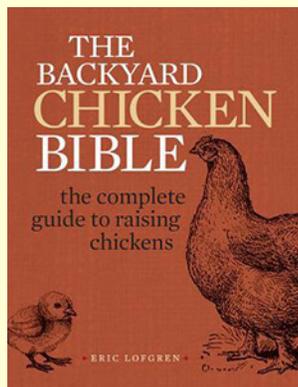
by Liath Appleton

New publications for December 2014:

The Manual of Plant Grafting: The Practical Techniques for Ornamentals, Vegetables, and Fruit - Dec 2, 2014

by Peter T MacDonald

Grafting, uniting part of one plant with another to create a single plant, has been used as a method of propagation for thousands of years. But new techniques have been introduced in the last twenty years, and the grafting of edible plants, like tomatoes, has recently become widely used. [\[more\]](#)



The Backyard Chicken Bible: The Complete Guide to Raising Chickens - Dec 12, 2014

by Eric Lofgren

Whether you want two chickens or two hundred, this manual will guide you along your journey to successfully raising chickens. Growing a backyard chicken flock is an investment, and one of the most important factors in cultivating a happy, healthy poultry society is taking the time to learn everything you can about your birds. [\[more\]](#)

Geotherapy: Innovative Methods of Soil Fertility Restoration, Carbon Sequestration, and Reversing Co2 Increase - Dec 17, 2014

by Thomas J Goreau (Editor), Ronal W Larson (Editor), Joanna Campe (Editor)

Conventional solutions to ecosystem loss, such as protected areas and parks, are far too small to make a meaningful difference. Large-scale restoration of damaged ecosystems is essential if climate is to be stabilized. This book covers innovative new technologies for restoring the most productive ecosystems on land while

maintaining high biodiversity. [\[more\]](#)

The Farm to Market Handbook: How to create a profitable business from your small farm - Dec, 19, 2014

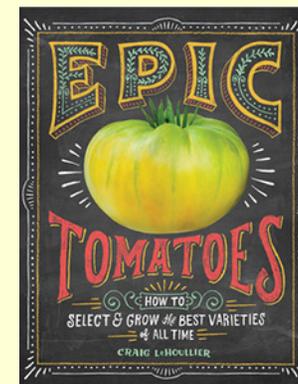
by Janet Hurst

Transform your pastime into your livelihood. If your sweet corn is tall, your brood of chickens is beautiful, and your half-dozen goats give delicious milk, then you know firsthand the rewards of running a small farm. [\[more\]](#)

Epic Tomatoes: How to Select and Grow the Best Varieties of All Time - Dec 30, 2014

by Craig Lehoullier, Sara Lehoullier

Savor your best tomato harvest ever! Craig Lehoullier, tomato adviser for Seed Savers Exchange, offers everything a tomato enthusiast needs to know about growing more than 200 varieties of tomatoes — from sowing seeds and planting to cultivating and collecting seeds at the end of the season. [\[more\]](#)



The Traveling Gardenista: Discovering local flora in botanical gardens and open spaces

by Heidi Roure

Galapagos Islands, Ecuador

One of the most special places on earth, my husband and I were blessed to explore the unique flora and fauna of the islands. There is simply no place like the Galapagos Islands. Entire books have been written about the wildlife and native and adapted plants. Here is a place where sea and land mammals coexist with tropical fish and cold-water penguins, flightless cormorants and nesting albatross, giant land tortoises and swimming sea turtles, tiny sea horses and 500 pound sea lions. It is no wonder these animals take center stage to the flora.

However, upon closer look, one will be amazed at the diversity and abundance of plant life. The islands are made of beautiful, black rugged lava rock where in some places only a few species of plants thrive. The salty air and dry season also limit what takes root on the islands. But like the desert, when it does rain, the vegetation comes to life in the driest places, and beyond the desert-like landscape and lava fields, the Galapagos Islands produce a wide range of vegetation in the wet highlands and white coastal coral beaches due to the variety in elevation and rain, ocean currents, and winds. Some parts of the islands are green year-around. Our eyes feasted on the lava cactus, yellow cordia and red and black mangroves as we hiked the shoreline and lowlands; the sea purslane and horse purslane decorated the sandy beaches and rocky cliffs. And this was just a sample. Beauty abounds across these enchanted islands.



Austin Area Events

Austin Herb Society Holiday Bazaar

Saturday, Dec 2, 2014
9:30am - noon

Zilker Botanical Gardens
2220 Barton Springs Rd
Austin TX

Spice Up Your Holidays at Austin Herb Society Holiday Bazaar Shop for sweet and savory breads, fragrant spice blends and extracts, herbal soaps, jewelry, and other handcrafted goods at the Austin Herb Society's annual Holiday Bazaar. AHS members and sponsors will offer products ranging from hand-thrown pottery to herbal teas and aromatherapy and skincare products. Also featured will be original artwork, herbal scrubs and mists, glass plate flowers and vintage fabric aprons, honey, jams and relishes. Gifts for everyone on your list will include baskets, home-sewn items, tea accessories, holiday greeting cards, Rosemary cook-books, herb-themed tote bags and pottery plant markers crafted by members. Shoppers are invited to enjoy herbal refreshments while listening to yuletide tunes and maybe even receiving a relaxing chair massage!

For more information, go to <http://www.austinherbsociety.org/>

Business Planning for the Small Acreage Producer

Thursday, Dec 11, 2014
9am - 12pm

Travis County East Service Center
6011 Blue Bluff Road
Austin, TX

Are you interested in learning more about business planning for your current or potential growing operation? Join us for this seminar to learn more! AgriLife Extension specialists in College Station will be joining us via web video to present this program.

Part of the Texas AgriLife Extension Small Acreage Horticultural Crops Series.

Register at <https://agriliferegister.tamu.edu/TravisCounty>
or by phone 979-845-2604

TRAVIS COUNTY MASTER GARDENER ASSOCIATION

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The Compost Bin Submissions

We are always looking for Travis County Master Gardeners who are interested in writing for our monthly newsletter, and we would love to see your articles, photographs, book reviews and gardening ideas.

General Guidelines

- Please first email the editor to discuss potential article ideas.
- Email contributions as attachments (preferably in Word with a .doc or .rtf suffix).
- Please send images as separate attachments (preferably .jpg suffix). Don't forget to include photographer acknowledgments and captions.

Send your submissions, announcements, questions and suggestions to: editor.compostbin@gmail.com



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www.tcmastergardeners.org
<http://travis-tx.tamu.edu>
512-854-9600

"The leafless poplars sway
A warm and windy Winter's day -
grackles chattering." - Michael Garofalo, Cuttings