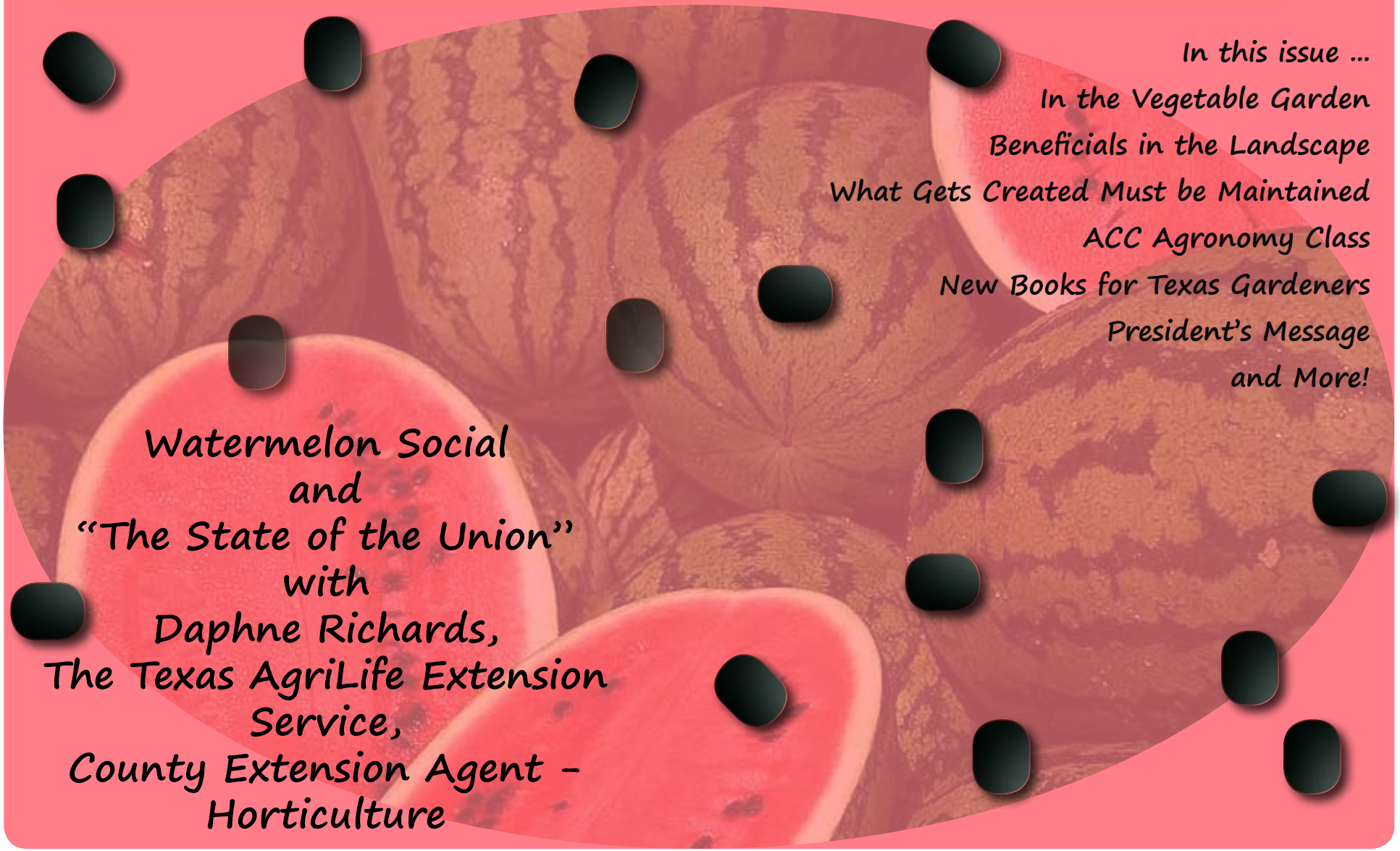
The Compost Bin

July 2011

A Publication of the Travis County Master Gardeners - A volunteer program of Texas AgriLife Extension



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and
"The State of the Union"
with
Daphne Richards,
The Texas AgriLife Extension Service,
County Extension Agent - Horticulture

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July Meeting Speaker — Daphne Richards

Watermelon Social and The State of The Union Address

Doors open at 6:30 PM. Come enjoy some ice cold watermelon at a social prior to the start of the meeting on July 6th Wish we could have a watermelon seed spitting contest but no food is allowed on the grounds… oh, well!

Come learn what is happening in the Master Gardener program. Daphne Richards will bring us up-to-date with local and state Master Gardeners' affairs in a "State of the Union Address". She will be boasting about TCMGA's past achievements and why she believes the future is especially bright for our organization! Daphne will announce the projects which have been approved for volunteer credit hours. To improve overall efficiency, she will review the forms which should be used to report volunteer and CEU hours, when to report, and to whom. Daphne will reiterate the cut-off date for reporting hours and the reason this needed to be reorganized. Also gain knowledge of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service Partial Cost Recovery Guidelines for Master Gardeners and discover if and how it will impact our organization. There will be time for questions and answers too.

Daphne Richards is the County Extension Agent for Horticulture with the Texas AgriLife Extension Service in Travis County. As such, she is our Master Gardener program coordinator. She recently celebrated her 11th year with Extension and her two-year anniversary in Travis County. She has a BA in botany from right here at UT Austin, and a MS in horticulture from Texas A&M. She previously taught high school for two years in La Joya, Texas and was the County Extension Agent — Horticulture in El Paso County for nine years.

Master Gardener Meeting information:
Wednesday, July 6th, 2011 starting at 6:30 pm.
Zilker Botanical Garden

Hello Master Gardeners:

A Message From Your President

Hmmm …
my veggie garden is pretty much a faded memory with burned up green beans, stunted cucumbers and tomatoes that have definitely seen better days. I will say my 'Black Cherry' and 'Sun Gold' cherry tomatoes are still going strong. Mark up one for the heirloom tomatoes!

For now, I am hacking and whacking back everything that is a fall-blooming plant in the hopes that we will have a fabulously average autumn with rain! I am trying my best to be optimistic regarding what is ahead for July and August. The asters, sages, salvias, Mexican mint marigolds, etc. are all under the blade. Roses will get their pruning next week.

We did experience a lovely rain storm, complete with lightening and thunder bolts, that sent Ruby (our Austrian Kelpie) under the bed. Absolutely amazing what an inch plus of beautiful rain can do for your yard, garden, rain collection tanks and our spirits.

For all of you that are leaving town for cooler areas, I don't blame you! It isn't fun setting new heat records every day. I am very alarmed at the falling water levels of our area lakes and streams. Poor Llano is now facing the prospect of bringing in drinking water as their Llano River continues to fall. Certainly we have major drought problems facing all of Texas. Not to mention the threat of wildfires that could erupt at any given time and place. Thank goodness there is a ban on fireworks this 4th!

Our new book, "Creating a Drought-Resistance Garden in Central Texas," is on the selves of several area nurseries. We should all be proud that we have created a book that helps each and every person with much needed material and advice. The Austin Public Library System has recently purchased twenty-one copies to have in their branch libraries around town. That speaks volumes!

As we prepare to head into our hottest months, let's hope we all manage to maintain some portions of our gardens.

My fairytale ending to this summer is that fall arrives early with lots of lovely cool, rainy days! That scenario ranks right up there with Texas football having another fabulous year ending with us playing for the National Championship.
Let's hope for either one!!!!

Happy gardening (as best as you can)!

Carolyn Williams

Above: A thunderstorm dumps heavy rain in Australia. Wish we could see these clouds in Central Texas.
Photo by Bidgee.

In The Vegetable Garden

by Patty Leander

My garden has succumbed … to the heat, the wind, the lack of rain, the City of Austin water restrictions and the nematodes, but my gardening spirit and optimism are alive and well. One thing that gardeners have known since the origins of gardening itself is that there will always be a second chance, a new season, an opportunity to try again.

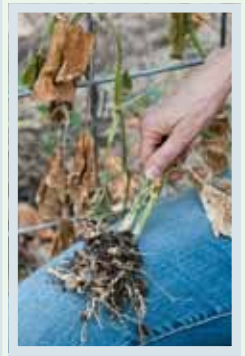
The grand prize in my "Tournament of Tomatoes" this spring went to 'Stupice' for its vigorous production, followed closely by 'Black Cherry' for its tart and juicy flavor, and 'Black Plum' for its abundant clusters of beautiful plum-shaped tomatoes that produced well into June, despite the dry, hot and breezy conditions.

A transition from warm to hot is normal at this time of year, but the long-lasting La Niña weather pattern has dictated the lack of precipitation and hotter than normal temperatures we have been experiencing. Weather forecasters say La Niña is fading, though it is unclear just how long her effects may linger. In the meantime, we should take advantage of this summer "dormant season" to dream, plan and prepare for the upcoming fall vegetable garden.

Summer tasks might include removing spent crops, planting a cover crop of field peas or buckwheat, and solarizing nematode-infested soil with clear plastic. Organic matter burns up quickly in hot weather, so add a new layer of compost before planting second-season crops in August and September. Try placing a square or round compost bin, made of chicken wire or fencing material, in an empty garden bed or row. Fill it up over the summer with kitchen scraps, grass clippings and garden trimmings, and be sure to keep it moist to encourage microbial activity. By fall it will be ready for mulching or composting adjacent crops. Decide which vegetables you want to grow in fall and sketch out a plan on paper, remembering to rotate crop families.

Plant pumpkins and winter squash in the garden this month for harvest in October or November. And if you want to grow your own tomato transplants for fall, now is the time to plant the seed. Look for fast-growing, determinate varieties like 'Solar Fire' or 'Sunmaster'.

With daytime temperatures hovering around 100° and nighttime temperatures reaching their low at 4:00 or 5:00 a.m., early morning is the best time to take care of garden chores. I'm not suggesting that you get up at the crack of dawn every day (thankfully our local farmers do!), but if you can manage it once or twice a week, gardening by moonlight and watching the sun rise while the rest of the world is still sleeping, is almost magical. Lately it seems that even the mosquitoes are at rest, or perhaps they've moved on, seeking moister habitat.



Left: 'Black Plum' (top) and 'Black Cherry' (bottom) tomatoes still producing in late June.
Right: Drooping leaves and swollen roots of a nematode-infested cucumber plant.
Photos by Bruce Leander.

In The Vegetable Garden Continued...

Reading is an excellent summer pastime and two recently published books are sure to inspire your inner gardener:

Heirloom Gardening for the South by two of Texas' most knowledgeable and admired garden writers, Bill Welch and Greg Grant, helps us understand the world-wide influences and heritage of our Southern gardens.

Slow Gardening, by Southern garden expert and funny man Felder Rushing, is an entertaining and laid back look at how to cut loose and have fun in the garden. Felder implores us to learn how to please ourselves and to garden with a grin instead of a grimace. As gardeners it's easy to relate to his egalitarian garden, where "every plant has the right to its pursuit of sunlight and admiration."

Right: A "garden cam" photo of the vegetable garden comparing the crops in mid-May and mid-June. Photos by Bruce Leander.

Mid-May

Mid-June

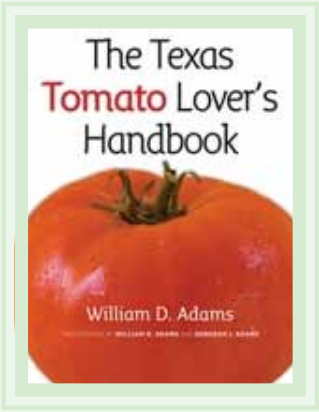
A side-by-side comparison of my garden in May and June to show the evolution of the vegetable garden and the changes that the weather has brought. Everything was growing strong in mid-May, but by mid-June the potatoes and onions had been harvested, the squash had been done in by squash vine borer, the beans had been assaulted by spider mites and the corn, well, the corn had been harvested and enjoyed — surprisingly no raccoons this year! Now the June/July garden conists of sweet potatoes, crowder peas, okra, melons and butter beans. They can take the heat as long as they get enough water ...

New Books For Texas Gardeners

Reviewed by Anne Van Nest

The Texas Tomato Lover's Handbook
By William D. Adams
A garden-grown tomato sliced and laid across a grilled hamburger ...
Sweet, plump cherry tomatoes in a crisp, green salad ...
Sauce made from fresh tomatoes, ladled over a steaming bowl of pasta ...
Spicy tomato salsa ...
Savory tomato soup ...
Mmm, can't you just taste those luscious tomatoes?

The Texas Tomato Lover's Handbook
By William D. Adams
Texas A&M University Press
Copyright 2011
Flexbound, 189 pages, $25.00



Is there any single vegetable as mouth-watering as the tomato? And yet, as thousands of people tired of mushy, half-green, and tasteless tomatoes bought from supermarkets have discovered, much more is involved in growing your own than simply putting a plant or two in the ground and expecting to harvest juicy, red tomatoes a few weeks later – especially in Texas!

Bill Adams, former Harris County Extension Agent draws on more than thirty years' experience to provide a complete, step-by-step guide to success in the tomato patch. Growing good tomatoes requires a gardener's attention to a variety of factors. Bill Adams begins this book by explaining the basics of soil preparation, planting, feeding, caging and watering. He also outlines the pros and cons of standard, hybrid, heirloom and cherry varieties, sharing tips about old favorites and suggesting new varieties. After the tomatoes are chosen, planted and thriving under his tutelage, Bill prepares gardeners for the insects, diseases, and other visitors they are likely to encounter, warning that "gardeners are not the only ones that love tomatoes." He ends by offering a few words about the "tomato kin folk," peppers, eggplants, tomatillos, and potatoes, along with a source list of selected suppliers.

Some tips from Bill Adams:

- Bird damage shows up on tomatoes as deep holes pecked into the fruit. After trying to peck a baseball painted red, most birds give up.
- Tomato seedlings need to be close to the fluorescent lights – six to twelve inches will ensure that they develop dark green and stocky.
- Cottonseed meal is a relatively cheap organic fertilizer that is available from most feed stores. Placing or banding fertilizer under the row is one way to concentrate the nutrients close to the tomato plants.
- Tomato plants grown in 5-gallon containers are great for getting an early start in the garden, but the containers are not large enough for production. A 20- to 30-gallon container results in a more extensive root system that can better supply water and nutrients to the developing fruit.
- Lay down a tall transplant to encourage roots to develop along the stem.

New Books for Texas Gardeners Continued...

• Tomato transplants can be protected from cutworm damage with a cardboard or aluminum foil collar around the stem.

Liberally sprinkled with the author's easy humor and illustrated throughout with excellent photographs, *The Texas Tomato Lover's Handbook* has everything you'll need to assure a bumper crop, year after year.

William D. Adams is a retired Harris County extension agent with thirty years' experience at the Texas AgriLife Extension Service. His writing and photography have appeared regularly in *Gardens & More, Horticulture, Texas Gardener, Family Circle, Mother Earth News, Sunset*, and other publications. He grows tomatoes at his home in Burton, Texas. Bill contributed the photos for this book with his wife Deborah.

Slow Gardening: A No-Stress Philosophy for all Senses and Seasons

By Felder Rushing

Slow Gardening: A No-Stress Philosophy for all Senses and Seasons

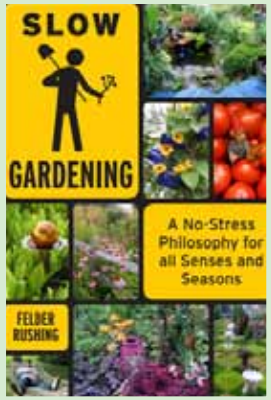
By Felder Rushing

Chelsea Green Publishing

Copyright 2011

Softcover, 220 pages, $29.95

Thanks to the resurgence of home and community gardening, more and more people are discovering the pleasure of biting into a sun-ripened tomato picked right off the vine, the earthy smell of freshly turned soil, and the cheerful harbingers of spring such as daffodils, irises, and pansies. But they are also discovering that gardening can be a heck of a lot of work. So what happens when keeping up with the weeds turns into a full-time job? What do you do when gardening becomes stressful? Slow Gardening to the rescue! Inspired by Slow Food, an international movement that promotes local food systems and biological and cultural diversity, the slow-gardening approach can help us all appreciate and enjoy our gardens more, year in and year out.



Doing something slowly means savoring what you do. However, in just a few generations, we've gone from eating mostly home-cooked food and gardening with mostly local resources to a fast-food culture and cookie-cutter "mow-and-blow" landscapes filled with unproductive and high-maintenance plants from afar. Sure, we've shed a lot of the menial labor it takes to put both food on the table and flowers in the garden, but at what cost to the Earth, and our own bodies?

Author Felder Rushing, a truly one-of-a-kind garden expert, offers this practical yet philosophical approach to gardening – one that will help you slow down, take stock of your yard, and follow your own creative whimsy in the garden. *Slow Gardening* will inspire you to slip into the rhythm of the seasons, take it easy, and get more enjoyment out of your garden, all at the same time.

An excerpt from *Slow Gardening*:

Some Slow Gardening Tenets

People often get bogged down with the details of life, seeing everything as a confusing morass of intricacies – like a ball of rubber bands.

New Books For Texas Gardeners Continued...

This book attempts to "de-construct" gardening into simple acts that are in themselves only tools for attaining the bigger goal of savoring our lives. Here are a few of the basic concepts or tenets of Slow Gardening:

Take it easy. Slow doesn't necessarily mean simple or lazy. In fact, it can actually involve more work, just spread out over time in a leisurely fashion. It's a one-foot-in-front-of-the-other approach similar to preparing regular, interesting meals at home.

There is no need to get hung up about the rules of garden design and step-by-step instructions in gardening how-to books. You can be cussedly independent, contemplative, unhurried, and unworried. Be in it for the fun, and take your time about it.

Don't be paralyzed by what you're not doing right, or by what you think you ought to do. Slow Gardening does not discriminate based on materials, personal style, or level or interest or expertise.

Along these lines, *Slow Gardening* is less about style, and more a way of being in tune with whatever rings your bell. Slow Gardeners might be hard-core green gardeners with a penchant for native plants and sustainable methods, or sharply focused lawn fanatics, daylily collectors, or people who just love to grow tomatoes. They're not trying to get anywhere, since they have already reached their destination. If it thrills you and you're doing it, that's Slow Gardening.

Felder Rushing is a tenth-generation American gardener, raised into his teen years under the apprenticeship of a horticulturist great-grandmother who grew flowers, vegetables, herbs, and fruits without a hose or pesticides, and a garden club grandmother who garnered hundreds of blue ribbons for her plant breeding and displays.

Texas Peach Handbook

By Jim Kamas and Larry Stein

An up-to-date guide for commercial and residential peach growers . . .

With an estimated one million trees producing almost fifty million pounds of fruit per year, Texas is a leading producer of peaches, and several popular seasonal festivals highlight the widespread enjoyment of and interest in this delicious, versatile fruit. In addition, a recent rise of interest in edible gardens and home fruit production has led more people to think about planting a peach tree in the yard — or paying closer attention to the one they already have.

Texas Peach Handbook
By Jim Kamas and Larry Stein
Texas A&M University Press
Copyright 2011
Flexbound, 147 pages, $24.95

Jim Kamas and Larry Stein, drawing from their many years of experience and the best current research, provide authoritative advice for those who want to improve peach production, whether in a large commercial orchard or on a single tree in the back yard. With discussions ranging from site selection to marketing ideas, *Texas Peach Handbook* covers the basics of peach cultivation — planting, pruning, fertilizing, watering, protecting, thinning, harvesting—and gives both instruction on disease and insect control and advice on the financial aspects of the peach business. The authors also direct readers to other, more detailed or technical sources, for those who want to learn more about a given topic.

New Books for Texas Gardeners Continued...

For its complete and useful information and expert guidance, this how-to handbook will prove indispensable for anyone who grows, or wants to grow, peaches either commercially or in the backyard.

A valuable chapter on cultivar and rootstock recommendations for Texas peach growers is essential reading for anyone growing peaches — once the winter chilling hours have been determined. Austin is in the 600-700 winter chilling hours region. Lists and descriptions of cling, semi-cling and freestone varieties will help fine tune the selection process.

Jim Kamas, based in Fredericksburg, is assistant professor and extension horticulturist in the department of horticultural sciences, Texas A&M University, and the Texas AgriLife Extension Service. He was formerly a research associate in the Texas A&M peach breeding program, has taught undergraduate fruit production classes at Texas A&M University and was a commercial peach grower for ten years in Austin County Texas.

Larry Stein is professor and extension horticulturist in the department of horticultural sciences, Texas A&M University, and the Texas AgriLife Extension Service. He worked at the Texas AgriLife Research and Extension Center in Stephenville for seven years before moving to Uvalde.

Heirloom Gardening in the South

By William C. Welch & Greg Grant

A new edition of the classic work, *The Southern Heirloom Garden* adds 300 more pages of valuable information about heirloom plants belong in Southern gardens. Tough and adapted, tried and true, pretty and useful, these living antiques – passed through countless generations – represent the foundation of traditional gardens as we know them today.

Heirloom Gardening in the South is a comprehensive resource that also offers a captivating, personal encounter with two dedicated and passionate gardeners whose love of heritage gardening infuses the work from beginning to end. Anyone who wants to know how to find and grow time-honored and pass-along plants or wants to create and nurture a traditional garden is sure to find this a must-have addition to their home gardening library.

Heirloom Gardening in the South
By William C. Welch & Greg Grant
Texas A&M University Press
Copyright 2011
Flexbound, 535 pages, $29.95

A book excerpt:

A Garden in the Wilderness, German Influence by Greg Grant

With the exception of Missouri, no Southern state received such a massive influx of German immigrants as did Texas. Ship after ship filled with Germans seeking their "new Germany" arrived into the ports of Galveston, Indianola and New Orleans. In 1846, about eight thousand arrived in Galveston alone. Because the immigrants tended to settle together, the German influence was often far more pronounced, or even overwhelming, locally. According to *German Seed in Texas Soil*, the populations of Galveston, Houston, and San Antonio during the 1850s were roughly one-third German.

As new arrivals, the Germans gardened to feed themselves. In addition to what they could grow, the immigrants harvested a great many foods from the wild, including wild grapes, plums, blackberries,

New Books for Texas Gardeners ...Continued

and anything else deemed edible. As one German settler put it, "We ate what we liked and we ate what we didn't like."

Like most early settlers, the Germans grew such edible crops as sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes, corn and cabbage. It doesn't appear that the Germans were responsible for introducing any new types of vegetables into Texas, but they can be credited with new uses for existing crops. It was the German influence that led to an increased consumption of white, or "German" potatoes, and the use of cabbage for kraut, tobacco for cigars, and wheat for "light bread" and flour tortillas.

At least in their own estimation, the German immigrants were generally better gardeners than their Anglo neighbors. In 1845, Prince Carl of Solms-Braunfels, the first commissioner-general of the Society for the Protection of German Immigrants in Texas, pointed out, "All of the garden vegetables grow abundantly if one takes the pains to plant them. The American is usually too lazy to prepare a garden. Rather than go to such trouble, he prefers to live on salted meat, bacon, corn, and coffee and to deny himself any greenery either for nourishment or for beautifying the home. However, the German settlements are distinguished by their beautiful gardens, vegetables, and flowers. "

Apparently, Germans were among the first settlers in Texas to adorn their surroundings with flowers and ornamental plantings. Traveling across Texas in 1854, Frederick Law Olmstead described his accommodations for a night he spent in the German community of New Braunfels: "A little room it proved, with blue walls again, and oak furniture … two large windows with curtains, and evergreen roses trained over them on the outside – not a pane of glass missing or broken – the first sleeping room we have had in Texas where this was the case."

Inside the book:

Essays on naturalizing daffodils, slips and starts, and growing fruit; An heirloom plant encyclopedia; Extensive plant lists (bulbs, cemetery plants, etc.); and the latest on the creation of two of the authors' personal gardens.

Patty Leander, Travis County Master Garden and *Texas Gardener* contributing writer says about Heirloom Gardening in the South, "Combining world history, abundant horticultural wisdom and two lifetimes of experience, Bill and Greg bring tribute, reverence, and authentic meaning to the term "heirloom." When I read the section on German influences I couldn't help but think of my own grandfather of German heritage, a farmer who loved coaxing beauty and bounty from his land in Alamance County, North Carolina. In today's hyper-paced world, we need such gentle reminders of the customs, cultures, and plants that have shaped and contributed to our rich Southern heritage. Thank heaven for Bill Welch and Greg Grant, and for their dedication to Texas and the South."

William C. Welch is professor and AgriLife Extension landscape horticulturist in the Texas A&M System. He has many years of experience with garden clubs and nursery organizations and is a regular contributor to *Southern Living Magazine*. On the board of directors of the Southern Garden History Society, he is also an honorary member of the Garden Club of America, which awarded him its distinguished service medal in 2008.

Greg Grant is the Stephen F. Austin Gardens outreach research associate at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches. A former AgriLife Extension agent and lecturer in horticulture at SFA, Grant has traveled extensively to gardens in the U. S. and Europe and is a popular speaker on garden topics throughout the South. He is a regular contributor to *Neil Sperry's Gardens* and writes the column, "In Greg's Garden," for Texas Gardener.

Announcing: ACC Agronomy Class

ACC Agronomy Class, Fall 2011

As part of its Erosion and Sediment Control advanced technical certificate, Austin Community College's (ACC's) Environmental Science and Technology department will be offering an Agronomy (soil science) class for the Fall 2011 semester.

The course will give students an understanding of soils, soil formation, soil types and classification, distribution of soil types geographically, the rates of soil formation, collection and analysis of soils, and the causes and methods to address soil erosion. The student will learn soil collection and analysis techniques, as well as the causes of soil loss and degradation and the methods to prevent soil erosion.

The Agronomy class will held on Mondays and Wednesdays from 5:30 – 8:10 PM at the Rio Grande campus. Registration for the Fall 2011 semester runs through August 17th, and the first class will be on August 22nd.

Please note that this class has been offered twice before, but canceled due to low enrollment — if the class doesn't make this fall, it may not be offered again. So if you've been thinking of taking it, now is the time to enroll.

Details can be found at:

- Austin Community College — www.austincc.edu
- ACC Env Sci & Tech Dept — www.austincc.edu/envrnsci
- ACC Agronomy class description — www3.austincc.edu/it/cms/www/catalog/coursedetails_fox.php?year=2012&deptcode=ESTE#AGCR1494
- ACC Agronomy class schedule — www6.austincc.edu/schedule/index.php?op=browse&opclass=ViewSched&term=211F000&disciplineid=TFPHH&yr=2012&ct=CC

Any questions contact Kathy McCormack at VEFL21@yahoo.com or leave a message at 512-698-9880.

Note: Dr. Staff from ACC will be at the July Master Gardener meeting to discuss this class.

Above: Iowa State Agronomy students studying a soil sample in Uganda.
Photo courtesy Department of Agronomy, Iowa State University.

What Gets Created Must be Maintained

by Bob Beyer

Fact and reality check: There is no such thing as a maintenance-free garden. For every garden bed that is prepared and every plant that is planted, there is a continuing burden (or joy if you are a real gardener), to maintain that which has been created. These maintenance chores (or delights if you are a real gardener) are year round, and exist as long as your garden exists. It all depends on how much you take pride in the appearance of your garden (which you do if you are a real gardener).

A few common sense strategies include:

Not creating garden beds that you know you won't have time to properly maintain. An uncared for garden often looks worse than no garden at all. This is the biggest mistake many gardeners make – biting off more than they can chew. We all long to maximize and expand our beautiful gardens but must consider the "hereafter" maintenance factor.

Careful choice of plants that will minimize maintenance problems and requirements. There are so many choices available beginning with native and adaptive plants that will grow well with minimal intervention. Understand a plant's growth habit and what will be required to keep it in scale with your other plantings. Plant according to a plant's ultimate size, not for a "here and now" instant effect. There are dwarf and slower growing varieties of many of our favorite plants with reduced maintenance.

Plan a garden area design that facilitates necessary maintenance tasks – e.g. can you mow and edge easily around plants and beds, access bed areas easily for weeding and trimming, and place plants with similar maintenance requirements together.

Use preventative maintenance strategies that will minimize care requirement for plants and garden beds such as applying mulch in spring to preserve ground moisture and/or provide weed infestation barriers, use compost to build up soil health and nutrients so supplemental fertilization won't be needed, and don't put off any maintenance chore to the point where it becomes a major project. Pulling a weed one at a time as they pop up is better than re-cultivating an entire bed that has become infested with weeds.

The best way to approach garden maintenance is to take a garden walk daily or several times a week to closely observe and note what is happening. An ounce of prevention beats a pound of cure if any problems are spotted early and treated before they become serious. As a fringe benefit, you get to enjoy seeing your garden in it's fullest more often. Take a camera with you and look for that photo-op. An ornamental garden is meant to be enjoyed, stimulate your senses, offer tranquility and a sense of wonder about nature's living plants and organisms — not become a laborious part of life that is dreaded. I'd much rather grow fewer things well, than try to grow many things poorly.

I know my own physical and time limitations and respect them in my gardening practices, making sure that the ability to properly maintain the beautiful gardens I've created is a priority, otherwise, why garden at all?

Used with permission from the Gardening In Central Texas blog www.centraltexasgardening.wordpress.com

Above: *Crocosmia (Montbretia) blooming with Artemisia (right) and yellow Kniphofia Torch Lily (back).*
Photo by Anne Van Nest

Beneficials in the Landscape

by Wizzie Brown

First off, let me mention that a pest is all a matter of perspective. There are insects that are commonly thought of as pests that can also be considered beneficial when viewed through the proper lens. An easy example would be termites. People are very unhappy when they find termites eating the cellulose material in their home, but in a natural setting, termites help break down cellulose material when trees fall in the forest. Of course, this works both ways. A flipped example is ladybird beetles. They are often called beneficial insects because they help to consume aphids and other small, soft-bodied insects that attack desired plants. I have seen ladybird beetles by the thousands enter my parents' home to overwinter. These beetles are not the kind little helpers that ladybugs are made out to be — they dive bomb you, bite you and can stain fabrics with a fluid they exude. So keeping that in mind, let us proceed with common "beneficials" you may find in the landscape.

Ladybird Beetles a.k.a Ladybugs

Ladybird Beetles (left to right): adult, eggs, pupae, larvae.

Hover Flies (left to right): adult, pupae, larvae.

Ladybird beetle adults come in a variety of sizes and colors. Many of them are some shade of red and often have spots. Eggs are often laid in clusters near a food source, often aphids. The eggs are a yellowish-orange color and look like footballs sitting up on their end. Most larvae are elongated and a blackish-grey color with orange markings. Ladybird beetles pupate on the plant and pupae are non-moving. The adults and larvae are the stages that help to control soft-bodied pests such as aphids, whiteflies, mealybugs and scale insects.

Hover Fly Larvae

There are numerous species of hover flies and some of them are considered beneficial. Beneficial hover larvae feed on small, soft-bodied insects like aphids and mealybugs. Adults are also beneficial, but as pollinators. The adults mimic bees and wasps, but you can tell they are flies because they have two wings instead of four. Larvae, at least the ones I see in Central Texas, are a pale green color with white and hot pink markings down the center of the body. Pupae are on the plant and sort-of look like bird poop.

Beneficials in the Landscape Continued

Green Lacewings

Most lacewing eggs are very distinct — they are a single egg on the top of a long stalk. Eggs are often laid in clusters on plants. Larvae are elongated and tapered on both ends with large, sickle mandibles that they use to stab prey. Adults are bright green, with wings with many veins and cross-veins. Some lacewing adults are predaceous, but the larvae are the main beneficial. Larvae feed on small, soft-bodied insects and mites.

Assassin Bugs and Ambush Bugs

These bugs are closely related to stink bugs and leaf-footed bugs. Assassin and ambush bugs have 3 segmented piercing-sucking mouthparts. These bugs come in a variety of colors with assassin bugs usually being darker in color than ambush bugs. The assassin bugs also have a more elongated head compared to the ambush bugs. Ambush bugs have thickened front legs that they use to capture and hold prey. Immatures, or nymphs, look similar to the adults but do not have fully developed wings. Eggs are usually deposited in masses and are cylindrical in shape. These bugs eat a wide variety of insects, including some insects that are considered to be beneficial.

Praying Mantises

Praying mantises are general predators in the nymphal and adult stages. They are also cannibalistic. Adults are fairly large insects with an elongated prothorax and front legs modified for capturing prey. Nymphs look similar to adults but are smaller and do not have fully developed wings. Adult females lay egg cases on small twigs and branches. At first the egg case looks like a frothy mass, but it soon hardens into an elongated, ridged case.

Green Lacewing: eggs.

Assasin Bug: adult.

Praying Mantises (left to right): nympth, adult, egg case.

Beneficials in the Landscape Continued

Spiders

Spiders are not insects, but arachnids. They have two body regions and eight legs which differentiates them from insects. Spiders are a large group with many shapes, colors and sizes. They are general predators as immatures and adults. For more information on specific spiders, see spider ID article from the May 2011
issue of the Compost Bin here:
http://www.tcmastergardeners.org/newsletter/2011/News2011.05.pdf

Parasitoids

The majority of parasitoid insects are wasps or flies. They are usually small and go unnoticed. These insects lay their egg on or inside another stage of an insect — egg, larva, nymph, pupa or adult — and develop on or within the host, eventually killing the host. Some parasitoids have only one insect emerge from the host, while others have several hundred individuals emerge from an egg case. Sometimes you may be able to spot insects that have been parasitized while other times you cannot. Aphid mummies are an example of insects that you can tell have been parasitized. Aphid mummies change color and become immobile.

There are many more beneficial creatures that help keep pest populations in check. Before you decide to utilize a pesticide to manage a pest, take a closer look to see if nature is already controlling pests for you.

Left: Biocontrol at work.

All photos provided by Wizzie Brown.

Coming Events

Central Texas Lawn Care

Thursday, July 14, 2011,
7 p.m. - 9 p.m.

Zilker Botanical Garden

2220 Barton Springs Road,
Austin, Texas 78746

Central Texas weather is presenting us with more challenges than usual in the landscape, especially with lawns. Master Gardener, Jerry Naiser will provide you with solutions for growing a healthy lawn.

Topics will include choosing the right type of turf for your soil conditions, irrigation, fertilization, proper mowing techniques and how to diagnose and treat pests and diseases.

This seminar is free and open to the public. It is presented by the Travis County Master Gardeners, a volunteer arm of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service in Travis County. For more information see www.tcmastergardeners.org or call the Master Gardener Help Desk at (512) 854-9600.

The Joys of Container Gardening

Friday, July 15, 2011,
10 a.m. - 12 p.m.

Texas AgriLife Extension Office,

1600-B Smith Rd,
Austin TX

Blooming flowers and vegetables can thrive in a container! This gardening method is especially useful if space is limited. Containers may also serve as accent points on the patio or in the garden. Learn how to select a container and the right soil, discover ideal container plants, and witness arranging techniques you can replicate to create your own mini-garden.

This seminar is free and open to the public. It is presented by the Travis County Master Gardeners, a volunteer arm of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service in Travis County. For more information see www.tcmastergardeners.org or call the Master Gardener Help Desk at (512) 854-9600.

Fall Vegetable Gardening

Saturday, August 6, 2011,
10 a.m. - 12 p.m.

Zilker Botanical Garden

2220 Barton Springs Road,
Austin, Texas 78746

Attention: Vegetable Gardeners…cooler weather gives you an opportunity to grow and enjoy food that flourishes in the fall and winter months. Broccoli, lettuce, Swiss chard, radishes and spinach are just a few of the
favorites that grow well here. Join Master Gardener Patty Leader to learn about these varieties and strategies for bringing a bountiful fall harvest to your table!

This seminar is free and open to the public. It is presented by the Travis County Master Gardeners, a volunteer arm of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service in Travis County. For more information see www.tcmastergardeners.org or call the Master Gardener Help Desk at (512) 854-9600.

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1600-B Smith Road, Austin, Texas 78721
512-854-9600 drichards@ag.tamu.edu

This issue of the Compost Bin has been published thanks to the contributions of the following Travis County Master Gardeners and Wizzie Brown — Texas AgriLife Extension:

Contributing Writers: Bob Beyer
Patty Leander
Rosalie Russell
Anne Van Nest
Carolyn Williams

Editor and Layout:
Anne Van Nest

Webmaster:
Paula Middleton

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Visit the websites: www.tcmastergardeners.org and http://travis-tx.tamu.edu

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The End...

Time to get out and garden!