

Let's Talk Gardening

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The Country Gardener

Time to Get with the Program

Well, we've been doggin' it for two months now, so it's time to get on with it and get serious about some gardening. I just looked out the window and there are some asparagus sprouts already over two feet tall...missed those. Gonna have to look more often, I guess.

The potted-up tomatoes are getting kinda leggy, so I'm just gonna have to go ahead and put 'em in the ground and just hope that it doesn't freeze again. Usually the last freeze around here is about the middle of March so maybe we're not too early. Donno.

In Dr. Calvin Finch's column last Saturday, he talked about plants for shady areas of the yard. I thought I'd mention a few of the ones he talked about in case that's what you need. For bushes, you can start with dwarf yaupon holly, dwarf Chinese holly or dwarf Burford holly. These are all 3-5 feet tall and make nice hedges or foundation plantings. For blooming shrubs, you might wanna look at Turk's cap and shrimp plant. Both have smallish flowers, they come back every year, and the deer don't seem to relish the taste. These two seem to grow to about 5-6 feet tall. There're also nandinas. They get about 6-8 feet tall and the leaves turn to red in the fall. For a little larger tree, Texas or Oklahoma redbud do well in the shade (the redbuds are in bloom now) and only get to be 20-30 feet tall. They make good 'understory' trees; i.e., they can be planted under the live oaks and do very well. For shade-loving groundcovers that will do better than the St. Augustine grass, take a look at Asiatic jasmine, monkey grass, dwarf Ruellia, English ivy and Texas gold columbine. Thank you Dr. Finch.

Hey, tomorrow is the Spring Bloom Giveaway at the Quarry in San Antonio. If you wanna stop by, you can pick up a free plant and get answers to questions about gardening. I'm gonna be there from 9:00 am to noon and would love to meet you. It's sponsored by the San Antonio Water System and the Gardening Volunteers of South Texas (GVST.) C'mon by.

Speaking of GVST, next Monday the class is gonna be taught by Mark Peterson, the local Texas Forest Service guy and I'm gonna be there sharpening pruning tools (for a \$2 donation to GVST.) Mark talks about every aspect of trees from choosing the right one for a particular spot to pruning and maintenance. The classes are held in the Garden Center at the Botanical Garden—corner of Funston and New Braunfels; 12:15 – 3:15 pm.

At the last GVST class, Malcolm Beck was the speaker and, of course, spent the whole time talking about organic gardening. The major thing I picked up this time was when he was talking about how Mother Nature works when it comes to working with the soil. First off, nobody tills the soil in nature—it's never worked up or turned over or tilled or disturbed. When soil is turned over, the primary event that happens is that old weed seeds are brought to the top and, as soon as they get to the sunlight, they sprout. Instead, in nature, what we see on top (leaves, twigs, animal droppings, etc.) decomposes and becomes compost which in turn feeds the soil. In the top 12 inches of soil, you'll find bazillions of microbial life forms and about 90 percent of all the roots of surrounding plants including trees. Farmers have been doing what is called "no-till" planting for years. What it amounts to is covering the un-tilled soil with a couple of inches of compost and then planting seeds or transplants in rows or holes you dig. Malcolm indicated that it's best to take a spading fork and break up the un-tilled soil before adding the compost so that there isn't a hard layer under the compost. After the seeds sprout or the transplants start growing, cover the compost with 2-3 inches of some type of mulch. I think I'm gonna give this a shot in my veggie beds to see what happens. How 'bout you?

Send your ideas, questions, or comments to gardener@gvst.com