

Let's Talk Gardening

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Time to Start Thinking Seriously about Gardening

Now that we've turned the corner on the calendar, it's time to start thinking about what you're gonna be doing this spring in the various gardens around the house. It's a little colder today than it's been in the last week or so, but that's just the way it happens here sometimes. We haven't had enough rain for the last several months to put any measurable water in the ground so it would probably be a good idea to water the beds you want to plant 3-4 times before you try to start digging.

Please don't start ordering stuff from catalogues that you receive in the mail unless you're pretty sure what they're selling will grow and prosper in our South Texas climate. Stuff that you buy from Michigan or Illinois ain't necessarily acclimated to our desert weather. I'm speaking from experience here, folks. Remember, you can't be a real Master Gardener until you've killed at least 1,000 plants and I'm well on the way. If you're in doubt about whether a particular variety will grow here, check it out on the Texas A&M website; plantanswers.com. If it's not listed there, personally I wouldn't buy it. The same goes for the stuff sold at many nurseries around here. Some of them just buy stuff that sells, not necessarily what grows here. Do your homework before you start buying plants--buy only those varieties that do well here and you'll be a lot happier with the results.

If you haven't done so already, it's time to clean out the bird houses to get them ready for February. Martin scouts and first-breeding birds of other species will be in town in February. You wouldn't want them to come to a dirty house, would you? Also, there are still some hummingbirds around, so keep your feeders in place.

Continue to care for your pansies, bluebonnets, snapdragons, spring bulbs, dianthus, calendulas and other winter annuals. Don't over-water bluebonnets...they're xeriscape plants and will drown with too much TLC in the form of water. One of our neighbors gave me some daffodil bulbs the other day and I stuck them right into the ground. I noticed today that they've broken ground already. To me, that the first sign that Mother Nature is still in charge and everything's gonna be OK.

Bare-root and containerized fruit trees, blackberries and grapes should be selected and planted as soon as possible so they will be well established before spring growth begins. The selection of recommended varieties of fruit and nut trees is critical for long-term success...again, see the web site plantanswers.com.

If we don't get some rain soon, go ahead and water the St. Augustine lawn; ½ inch every 2-3 weeks is enough. Buffalo, zoysia and bermuda grasses are dormant—don't water them. If you put down some winter rye grass, it needs a little watering between mowings, but not much.

I've noticed that some stores have the weed-and-feed fertilizers out already. Please don't fertilize or use weed-and-feed products now. Basically nothing is growing right now (except maybe a few weeds and you don't wanna feed them) and you'll just be wasting your money. Dormant grass doesn't respond to water or fertilizer--no matter how much you put on. Wait until about May to fertilize the yard.

If you have some low spots in the yard that you can see now, this is a good time to gradually build up low spots in the lawn with ½-1 inch of compost or top-dressing.

Service the lawn mower by sharpening the blade, change the spark plug, change the oil, and drain old gasoline.

The first class the GVST (Gardening Volunteers of South Texas) is gonna sponsor this year will be held on January 23 at the Garden Center of the Botanical Garden in San Antonio. The topics for this class will center on spring gardening and the speakers will be Charles Bartlett and yours truly. GVST asks for a \$5 donation to defray the costs of producing materials for the class. It all starts at 12:15 and runs until about 3:00 pm or so. This is a great way to kick off the new gardening year. C'mon down.