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Horticultural Update



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Horticultural Update:
June 1994

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Plant of the Month... June

Dr. William C. Welch, Landscape Horticulturist
Texas A&M University
College Station, Texas

Chinese hibiscus, *Hibiscus rosa - sinensis*

Hibiscus offers an excellent source of summer color in the landscape and are one of our most popular tropical or subtropical flowering plants. Popularity in Texas appears to be increasing in recent years although insects, diseases and winter injury limit their use. Even the southern most extremes of Texas occasionally experience sufficient cold to kill this plant. With this in mind, hibiscus should be grown as an annual or container specimen in most of the state. In areas where winters do not cause damage, hibiscus is a perennial or evergreen and may be used as a more permanent landscape plant.

The glossy green foliage varies considerably in size and texture among the many varieties. Flowers range from four to eight inches in diameter and may be double or single. Hibiscus belong to the mallow family and ar closely related to cotton, hollyhock, turks cap, the mallows, shrub althea, confederate rose and okra. Colors vary from white through pink, red, yellow, apricot, and orange. Generally, the single flowered hibiscus bloom more and therefore offer a bigger show in the landscape but the doubles are sometimes preferred for their spectacular individual flowers.

Hibiscus flowers are popular for decorations. They need not be placed in water to prevent wilting which adds flexibility to their use. An objection is that the flowers of most varieties last only one day, especially during hot weather. Since the blossoms usually close at night, if one wants flowers for the evening, blossoms should be pulled as soon as they are fully open in the morning and placed in the refrigerator until just before using. If no leaves are pulled with the blossoms, picking does not damage the plants or reduce the total amount of flowering.

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Pre-Vacation Planning Pays:

Ted Fisher, Travis County Extension Horticulturist
Austin, Texas

Now that summer has arrived, you may be thinking about taking that well-earned vacation. If you are planning to take an extended vacation now or later this summer, be sure your landscape is in order prior to leaving. Lawns, gardens and landscapes left unattended, and uncared for several weeks can be virtually ruined by our summer's sun, wind and heat.

Just a little extra effort on your part before leaving can make a big difference in the health and well-being of your plants. Here are some practical tips which should help to ensure that your home landscape will not suffer the post vacation blues.

Water the home grounds well prior to leaving. Soak your lawn, gardens and all landscape plants deeply. Our shallow soils can dry out rapidly even after heavy

watering, so if you'll be gone over a week, plan to have a neighbor hook up your hose and do a little supplemental watering.

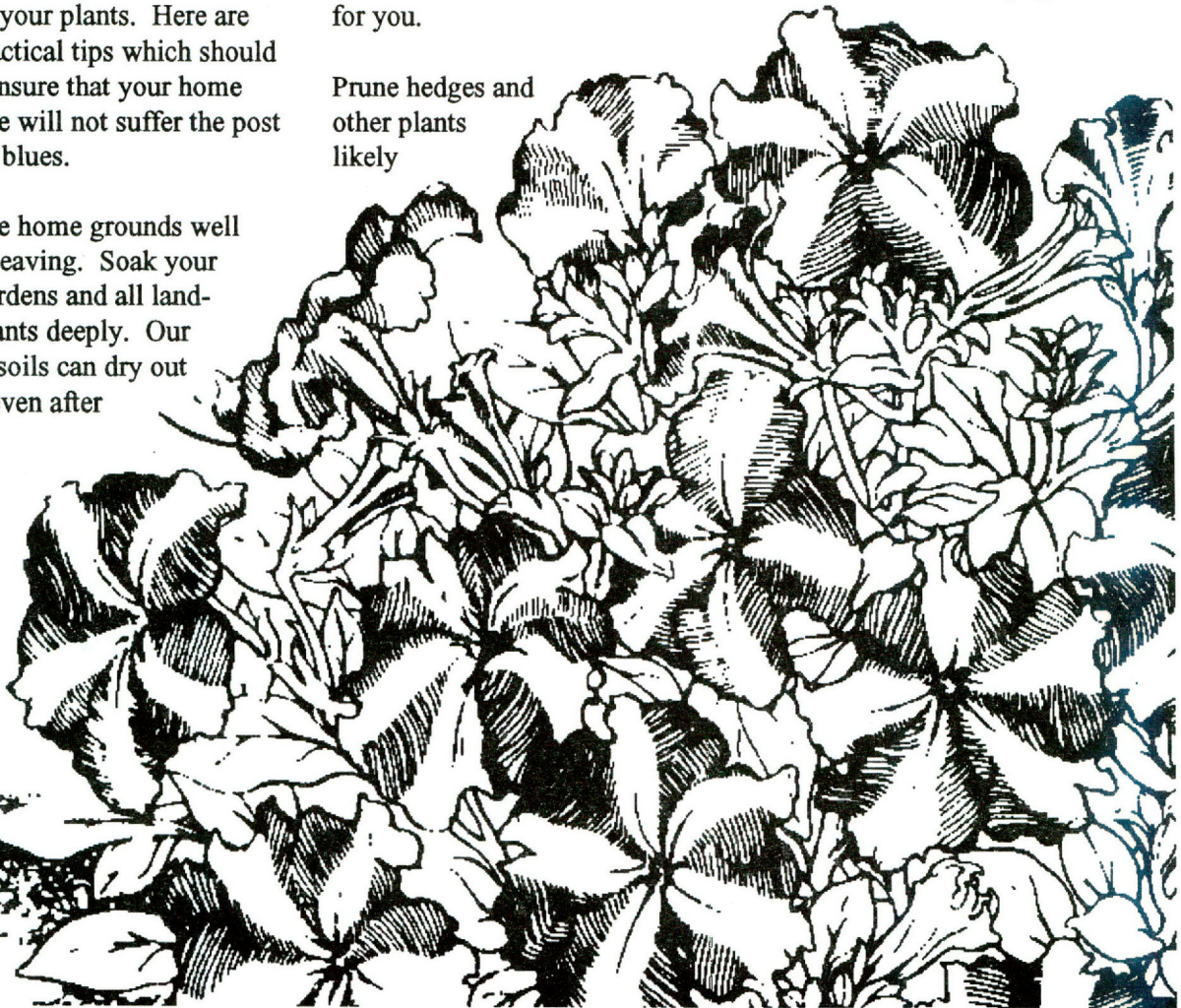
Mow your lawn a day or two before you leave. Use the same cutting height that you normally do. Don't lower the mower blade for a "closer shave." Doing so could easily cause sun scald and damage. If you plan to be gone more than a week it would be a good idea to arrange to have a friend or neighbor mow the lawn for you.

Prune hedges and other plants likely

to get gangly by the time you return.

Mulch to help conserve valuable moisture needed for plant growth while you are home or away. Choose a clean mulch, free of weed seed, and one which will remain loose and well aerated. Consider grass clippings, pine bark, compost, or a variety of other organic materials. Mulching will also reduce or eliminate the weeding problem.

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How to Avoid Poison Ivy:

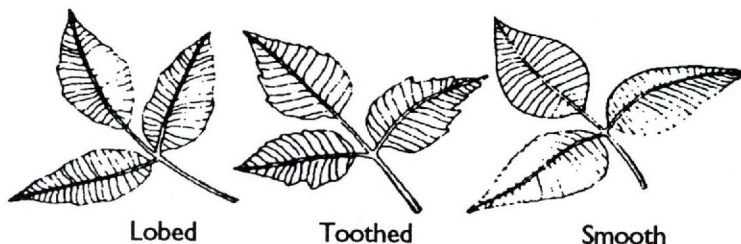
Dr. Tommy Welch, Professor and Extension Specialist
Department of Rangeland Ecology & Management
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College Station, Texas

For many people, poison ivy problems accompany the arrival of spring. Some people are more sensitive than others, and no one is fully immune. The first symptoms, itching and burning, may develop a few hours after exposure to the plant, or they may appear after 5 days or longer.

Poison ivy grows throughout Texas, particularly along streams and in moist, shady places. The danger from poisoning is greatest in the spring and summer, even though poisoning can occur in fall and winter.

Although all parts of poison ivy plants are toxic, contact with the sap causes the strongest effects. Even small amounts of the plant's toxic agent, urushiol, can cause skin inflammation. The toxin can be transferred from one object to another by pets which have run through poison ivy plants. Smoke from burning poison ivy plants also carries the toxin and can cause serious inflammation.

Several nonprescription lotions are available for treating skin inflammations caused by poison ivy. Apply lotion frequently to relieve itching and to soothe and dry, irritated area. See your doctor for treatment if irritation is not cleared up in 3 to 4 days.



Identification:

Poison ivy, a perennial, native plant that grows during warm seasons, belongs to the sumac genus of the cashew family. Three varieties of poison ivy, *Rhus toxicodendron*, grow in Texas.

The most widespread variety is common poison ivy, which has glossy green leaves with smooth margins. Other varieties have lobed or toothed leaf margins resembling oak leaves, thus the nickname is poison oak. Poison ivy grows as a vine, shrub or small tree. The leaves are always divided into three leaflets. This is the basis for the old saying, "Leaflets three, let it be."

Oakleaf poison ivy usually grows lower than the smooth-leaved variety. Clusters of inconspicuous white flowers arise from the axis of the leaves. The plants develop white, waxy berries with distinct lines marking their outer surfaces into segments which resemble those of peeled oranges.

Prevention:

To prevent inflammation from poison ivy, follow these precautions:

Avoid contact with poison ivy plants.

Keep pets away from poison ivy plants. The toxin can remain on the pet's feet and fur for several days and be transferred to humans.

Do not burn poison ivy plant parts.

Wash contaminated clothing thoroughly and separately.

Wash any contaminated part of the body thoroughly with soap and water within 5 to 10 minutes after contact with poison ivy.

Pesticides: *Are they really necessary?*

Dr. Al Wagner,
Professor & Extension Specialist
Department of Horticultural Sciences
Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas

Dr. Charles Hall,
Associate Professor and Extension Specialist
Department of Agricultural Economics
Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas

Because of misguided media reports and certain anti-pesticide groups, consumers are worried about the safety of pesticides used on our foods. A Food Marketing Institute Survey indicates that 75% of American consumers consider pesticides a serious health hazard. This bulletin is designed to help consumers better understand: why pesticides are used; how they are tested; monitored; and their role in reducing residues.

Why Are Pesticides Used?

Pesticides improve food quality, safety and availability by reducing damage caused by insects, diseases and weeds. Products damaged by insects are more prone to bacterial or fungal infection. Certain molds produce toxins that may be toxic and/or carcinogenic in small quantities. There are an estimated 10,000 types of insects, 1,800 types of weeds, 250 species of viruses and 8,000 species of fungi that destroy crops. Even with the use of pesticides about one-third of the world's crops are destroyed by pests each year. This is at a cost of \$20 billion in the U.S. alone.

How Are Pesticides Tested for Safety?

The registration process for pesticides typically takes 8-10 years and costs range from \$35-60 million.

Some of the major tests include: residues on food; environmental

fate; acute studies of human hazards; subchronic studies; chronic studies; carcinogenicity; teratogenicity reproduction and mutagenicity studies.

The Environmental Protection Agency (E.P.A.) is responsible for setting tolerances for any approved pesticide. The NOEL (no observable effect level) test is commonly used. NOEL is the highest dose level of a pesticide at which no adverse effect was observed in test rodents. To further guarantee safety the NOEL is divided by 100-1,000 to determine the acceptable daily intake (ADI).

Nothing is 100% safe but after all of this testing there is usually less than 1 in 1 million chance that an adverse effect will occur using an approved pesticide as instructed.

How Are Pesticide Residues Monitored?

Testing for pesticide residues in our food products is the responsibility of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and certain state health and agriculture departments. Data from FDA and the 42 state programs show the following:

- (1) 70-80% No detectable residues
- (2) 20-30% Residues under recommended tolerance
- (3) 2-3% Contain residues of a pesticide which is not cleared for that crop.
- (4) less than 1% over recommended tolerance

What Can You Do To Ensure Safe Produce?

Besides eating a wide variety of healthful foods in moderation, there are several things individual consumers can do to ensure food safety:

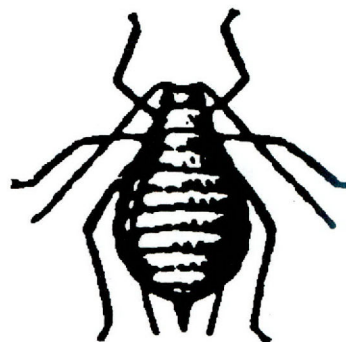
Wash all fruits and vegetables in water (no soap) before eating, using a scrub brush on produce that can stand it (example, potatoes).

Pull off the outer leaves of vegetables such as lettuce and cabbage. For the same reason, trim the leaves and tops of celery and peel fruits.

Store fruits and vegetables at correct temperatures and eat them while they are fresh.

When using pesticides on home-grown produce, be sure to follow all manufacturers' instructions carefully.

Pesticides are a useful tool that growers need to help insure quality produce at an economical price.





Garden Checklist for June

Dr. William C. Welch, Landscape Horticulturist
Texas A&M University
College Station, Texas

- Take a critical look at your landscape at the height of summer development. Make notes of any plants that need replacement, overgrown plants that need to be removed, better arrangements for your landscape, and possible activity areas that can be enjoyed by family members. These are good projects for next winter.
- Check for insects and diseases. Spider mites can be especially troublesome at this time.
- During the summer, water or soil moisture is essential for good plant production. Because continual watering is often costly and time consuming, it pays to conserve moisture around plants.
- The best way to conserve garden moisture is mulching. A good mulch not only retains valuable moisture needed for plant growth, but also improves overall gardening success.
- Mulches are usually applied 2- to 6-inches deep, depending on the material used. In general, the coarser the material, the deeper the mulch. For example, a 2-inch layer of cotton seed hulls will have about the same mulching effect as 6 inches of oat straw or 4 inches of coastal bermuda hay.
- Removing faded flowers from the plant before they set seed will keep the plants growing and producing more flowers. A light application of fertilizer every four to six weeks will also be helpful.
- Houseplants can be moved outside this month. Sink the pots in a cool, shaded garden bed to prevent them from drying out too quickly. Water pots, container plants and hanging baskets often. Monthly feeding with a household fertilizer encourages continued growth.
- Now is the time to plan for next spring. Consider digging and dividing any crowded spring bulbs. Once bulbs have matured and the foliage has turned brown, it is time to spade them up and thin out the stand. Crowded bulbs produce fewer and smaller blooms. Crowded bulbs produce fewer and smaller blooms. They usually need thinning every three to four years. Replant immediately in prepared soils.
- June is the month to select day lily varieties as they reach their peak bloom.
- Fertilize rose beds every four to six weeks. Apply small amounts of fertilizer high in nitrogen immediately after a flush of bloom or every four to six weeks.
- There is still time to plant some of the colorful, heat-tolerant summer annuals. You can direct-seed zinnias and portulaca, and purchase periwinkle, salvia, marigold and purslane plants for transplanting. Be sure to water transplants adequately until roots become established.
- Pinch back chrysanthemums, Mexican mint, marigold, autumn asters and other late summer and fall blooming annuals to prevent the necessity for staking.

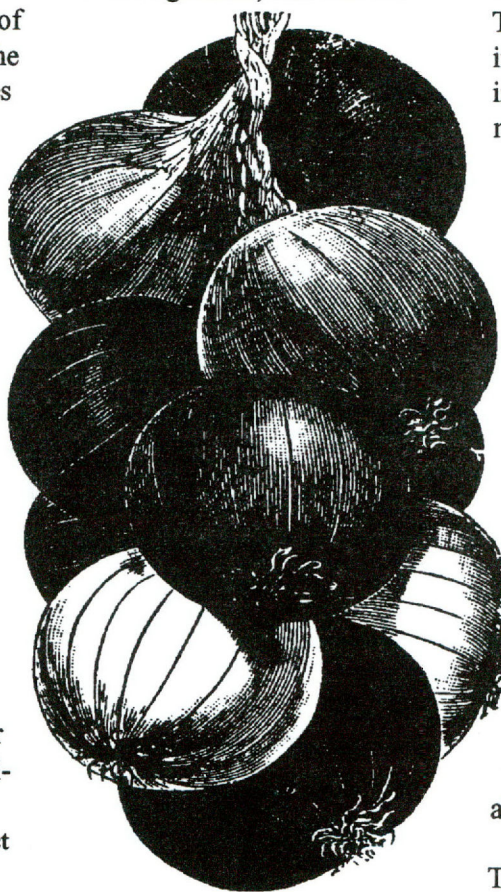
Fertilizing Vegetables:

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Department of Horticultural Sciences
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San Antonio, Texas

You don't fuel a Jaguar with kerosene. You don't adjust a computer with a monkey wrench. High performance items require extraordinary care and special consideration. The same is true of vegetable varieties and grass. The Extension recommended varieties are the first high performance types ever introduced into this market. If they are treated badly, they will produce badly. If they are pampered and "souped up" they will be magnificent. What is abuse of a higher performance vegetable variety? The answer is lack of consistent, persistent care. Consistency of care for a high performance variety involves a program of regular fertilization (every three weeks with ammonium sulfate) (21-0-0), preventive fungicide sprays (maneb or chlorothalonil products such as Ortho Multipurpose Fungicide or Fertilome Broad Spectrum Fungicide) every 7-10 days to avoid foliage damage and/or loss, insect control when needed and, in the case of tomatoes, support of vines off of the ground in wire-mesh cages. All of these cultural practices must be persistently adhered to if maximum production is expected.

Of all requirements mentioned, the most neglected is the lack of a periodic fertilization schedule. It has often been said that the Surefire tomato is specifically

adapted to heavily manured gardens, that Summer Sweet 860 bell pepper fruit are consistently larger and four-lobed in heavily manured gardens, and that the



largest onion bulbs ever grown were in a soil mixture of almost pure, well-decomposed manure. This is not a difficult phenomenon to understand when we realize that manure is the original slow release fertilizer. Manure consistently "feeds" plants. Most gardeners accept that two pounds of a slow-release fertilizer such as 19-5-9 should be added to 100 square feet of garden area before planting but

very few realize that additional plant food is required on a regular basis if maximum yields are to be expected. Maximum yield insurance is called side dressing. The term side dressing simply indicates an application of fertilizer, usually one containing nitrogen only, alongside the rows or in a circle around growing plants. This will insure a supply of nitrogen as the plant grows and develops and is particularly helpful in sandy soils or in seasons of abundant rainfall as nitrogen has a bad habit of being washed or leached out of the root zone area. Side dress with a nitrogen-only fertilizers such as ammonium sulfate (21-0-0) during the growing season and water in. Ammonium sulfate is best because it's very effective, readily available, relatively inexpensive plus it helps, at least slightly, to acidify our alkaline soils.

Thus, side dressing offers three very important advantages. Properly used, it helps prevent the delayed fruit set caused by excessive nitrogen too early in the season, it significantly increases yields and it results in healthier, stronger plants with fewer pest problems.

Hibiscus continued from page 1...

Hibiscus prefer a sunny location and well drained soil containing plenty of organic matter and nutrients. From April through September small monthly applications of a complete fertilizer are beneficial. Container grown plants will require more frequent applications. To bloom and grow profusely, hibiscus must have sufficient water. As with most other plants, watering should be done thoroughly and not too frequently. Some protection from strong winds is necessary since the flowers are easily damaged.

It should be remembered that hibiscus are not cold hardy. If your area is subject to freezing temperatures your hibiscus must either be treated as annuals and allowed to freeze or protected during cold weather. During mild winters plants may be frozen to the ground then sprout from the base the next spring. Applications of a loose mulch such as pine straw or oak leaves applied around the base of the plant before cold weather sometimes prevents severe winter injury. Certain varieties are more susceptible to cold damage than others. If greenhouse space is available, plants may be dug, placed in containers and replanted in the landscape after the danger of frost has passed.

In recent years there has been an increase in use of Hibiscus as container plants. Small plants may be purchased early in spring or summer, placed in 12 inch diameter or larger pots and enjoyed until frost.

Pre-Vacation Planning from page 2...

Check carefully and spray for insects and diseases to prevent a buildup of pests during your absence. Summer insects and diseases do not take a vacation, and will work overtime on your healthy plants. This goes particularly for chinch bugs. Make sure you have applied chinch bug control to your St. Augustine lawn, or you just might find it severely damaged by this little critter when you return.

Be sure that walks and flower beds are neatly edged before your departure. A buildup of growth while you are away will be difficult to manage on your return.

Take lawn and garden equipment by the repair shop, if needed. They'll have it ready when you return.

Harvest all ripe or nearly ripe fruit and vegetables. If you'll be gone over a week arrange for a friend to pull and use produce. Vegetables left unpicked will frequently cease to bear.

Have a nice trip knowing that things at home will be in fine shape when you return. And don't forget to visit some gardens while you're away. There are many spectacular gardens to enjoy in just about any part of the country you may be headed.

Arrange for a neighbor to pick up newspapers or ask the paper boy to hold them until you return. Newspapers scattered over the front lawn are a dead give-away that no one is home. Lights on a timer also provide an impression that someone is home.

Landscape preparation for a summer vacation may sound like a lot of extra work. Well, it's not really much more than the normal weekend chores in maintaining a healthy, well-groomed landscape.

Horticultural Update

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Fertilizing Vegetables continued from page 6...

The rate and timing of your side dress applications is important. Unless otherwise specified, one-half cup of ammonium sulfate (21-0-0) per 10 feet of row is adequate for most crops. Information about the best time to side dress some specific crops is outlined below:

Beans - snap, wax, lima - after plants flower and set first fruit.

Sweet Corn - when 8-12 inches tall; rate: 1 cup fertilizer per 10 feet of row.

Okra - 3 weeks after harvesting begins.

Tomatoes, Peppers, Eggplants - when first fruits are marble-size, at the rate of 1 level tablespoon per plant. Repeat every 4 weeks.

Onions - when 5 to 6 leaves are formed.

Potatoes - when 6-8 inches tall.

Vine Crops - Cantaloupe, cucumber, watermelon, squash, pumpkin - when vines are 1 foot long at rate of one level tablespoon per plant.

Sweet potatoes - in June.

Whenever side dressing, avoid getting the fertilizer particles on the plant foliage and always water in thoroughly after application. Do not dump the fertilizer on the base of the plant but instead evenly distribute it several inches away from the base.

This principle of moderate but more frequent applications of fertilizer will also work wonders for your flowers and for your new landscape plants during their first three seasons of growth. So if you plan to grow high performance vegetable hybrids grow them right or don't grow them at all!