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Horticultural Update



Government Publications
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Plant of the Month . . . March

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

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Yarrow, *Achillea millefolium*
Family: Achillea

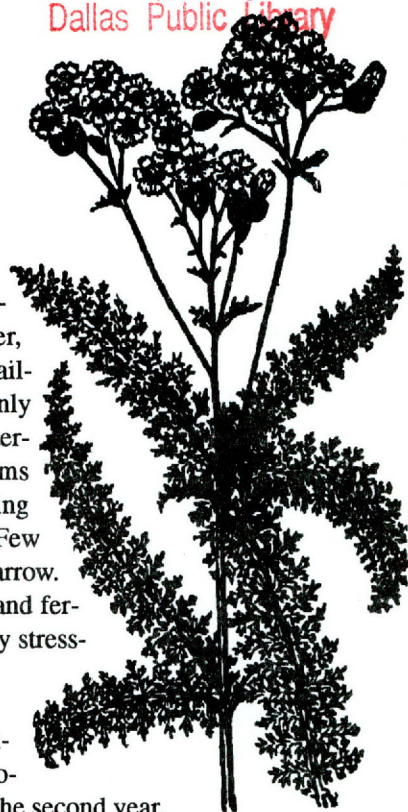
The yarrows are aromatic perennials useful in borders and rock gardens. Another common name is 'sun fern', which describes both its appearance and its preference for high light intensity.

Yarrows are native to Northern temperate areas and have naturalized in many parts of the United States, including the South. Dried flowers and leaves have been used medicinally, primarily in the treating of wounds. The flattish flower heads are popular for use in dried floral arrangements.

The white-flowering form of yarrow is most common, although dark pink, lavender, and yellow cultivars are available. Culture is easy, with only routine care: moderate watering, cutting back bloom stems after flowering, and dividing when clumps get crowded. Few insects or diseases attack yarrow. They respond to good soil and fertilizer but will tolerate fairly stressful situations.

Propagation is usually by division, although seed can produce flowering-size plants the second year. Availability is good, with most seed catalogues and perennial growers offering some cultivars.

The fernlike foliage and long bloom season, which may span spring through fall, make yarrows useful and interesting plants. The fine texture, ease of culture, and usefulness as dried material have made yarrows a staple item with knowledgeable gardeners. They are not often found in nurseries or garden centers and deserve wider use.



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Greenbelts Shelter Native Wildlife

*John Cooper, County Extension Agent
Denton County, Texas*

It would be difficult to imagine getting around in today's fast-paced world without a good road system. People simply couldn't get their needs met if they couldn't get around. In similar ways, all animals need to move around in order to have their needs met. Instead of asphalt or concrete, though, other animals prefer to run and flit through greenbelts.

Greenbelts are simply linear masses of trees and shrubs that harbor and protect wildlife. They not only provide avenues of travel for animals, including many bird species, but they supply them with food, cover, and nesting and burrowing sites.

Many times, the only greenbelts in urban and even many rural environments are located along creeks and streams. In this case, greenbelts provide a primary source of water for wildlife. Greenbelts along waterways also reduce stream bank erosion.

Greenbelts take many shapes and sizes. A simple backyard hedgerow is enough to harbor and provide habitat for numerous bird species. A network of hedgerows widening into a wooded lot at the edge of a vacant field might be home to cottontails and even raccoons if ample water is nearby. Add a tall tree at the edge of the open field and you could find a nesting pair of red-tailed hawks.

If you have some oaks or a few pecan trees, you are sure to have some Eastern fox squirrels. Get a little closer to the edge of town and you may see a lone red or gray fox or even spot an occasional bobcat. Certainly, the howl of the coyote at the edge of town is a definite reminder that we have not completely tamed our world.

Just less than ten years ago, white-tailed deer were found within the limits of the town of Flower Mound. Even today, white-tailed deer can be seen in the more rural parts of central and northern Denton County where pockets of woodlands and greenbelt strips several hundred acres in size remain covered in oak forest and bottomland hardwoods.

The United States Army Corps of Engineers' flood-zone property surrounding the three major reservoirs in Denton County



act as giant greenbelts, providing a diversity of wildlife habitat for most of the major animal species that inhabit this area. This buffer against land development virtually guarantees that Denton County will retain at least a remnant population of the major wildlife species indigenous to the area.

In urban development, greenbelts are often thought of as linear parks, a place for people to move about the city on foot or bicycle. If enough natural vegetation is allowed to persist, the possibility exists for wildlife to develop in them, but, of course, the animals must either be in the park already or be able to gain access to it through greenbelts.

Thoughtful planning and consideration of wildlife requirements before and during land development will give you the best chance of retaining and even, perhaps, enhancing the wildlife potential of your property. Conserving existing greenbelts and establishing new ones can enlarge and extend the home ranges of existing wildlife populations into greater parts of both rural and urban areas of Texas.

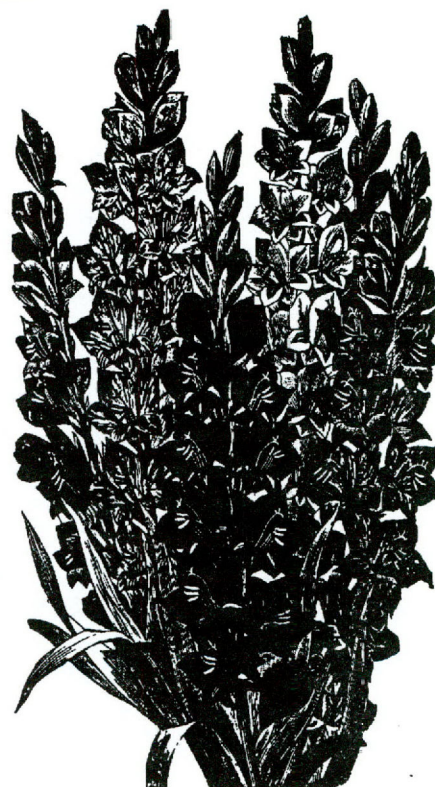
Gladiolus in the Garden

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

Gladiolus are grown for their showy spikes of flowers which come in many colors. There are large-flowering types as well as small. Glads may be used as background plants in the garden, or in rows, or as cut flowers for the home. If care is given to a planting schedule, flowers can be available from early summer until frost. To achieve this, the corms are planted at various times, usually at 2- or 3-week intervals, from as early as mid-February until the last of April.

Set the corms 4 to 5 inches deep and 5 to 6 inches apart in groups or rows. Gladiolus prefer well-prepared garden soils with good drainage. As soon as plants are 6 to 8 inches tall, apply fertilizer, such as 13-13-13, at the rate of 3 to 4 pounds per 100 square feet. Organic fertilizer sources, such as cottonseed meal, also work well. Water thoroughly when soil appears dry, and stake if necessary.

To save gladiolus corms for next year, dig the corms after the foliage has dried in late summer or fall. Remove the soil and snap off the dead tops. The old or original corm may be



removed and discarded at this time. Spread the corms out on the garage or storage-room floor and allow to dry for 3 to 4 days. Place the corms in boxes with dry peat moss or sawdust. If a large number is involved, make some boxes that are 3 to 4 inches deep with bottoms made of hardware cloth. Store in a dry, cool place at a temperature of 45 to 50 degrees F. Check them periodically during the winter for signs of rotting or rodent damage, and discard those affected.

At least two species of gladiolus are considered heirloom plants in our area and may be left in the ground and grown as perennials. *Gladiolus byzantinus*, sometimes known as cornflags, mark many old home sites and cemetery plots in Texas and the South. Their magenta and rarely-white flower spikes are smaller than the hybrids usually available in florists and nurseries. Another interesting gladiolus is *Gladiolus natalensis*, sometimes known as the parrot gladiolus. Flowers of this species, which is native to Africa, are larger than those of *G. byzantinus*, and are a brilliant combination of yellowish green and red. Both of these gladiolus may be grown as perennials, and usually increase in numbers each year. They are commercially available, however, only from specialty bulb sources.

Ground Cover Gives Mower a Rest

Keith C. Hansen, County Horticulturist
Smith County, Texas

Almost everyone is looking for ways to reduce the time spent maintaining the home lawn. A vigorous growing St. Augustine lawn may require mowing as often as every five to seven days. This is time that could be spent doing other landscape chores or perhaps enjoying a favorite sport or recreation. To decrease lawn maintenance, you can begin by reducing the size of your lawn. In most cases, you would not want to get rid of the lawn entirely; turf serves important aesthetic and practical purposes. But the size of the lawn can often be easily reduced. One way to do this is by replacing areas of grass with ground covers.

Ground covers, as the name suggests, are plants that are massed together to cover the ground. Lawn grasses are the most commonly used ground covers, but lawn grasses are not practical in all situations. Steep slopes, rocky hillsides, shady areas, narrow strips, or areas too large to manage easily as lawns can be made more attractive and less time-consuming to maintain with ground-cover plants. They are not only great problem-solvers in the landscape, but large informal beds of ground cover contrast nicely with the lawn and make both more distinctive.

The selection of attractive ground covers is large. For every soil type, light exposure, or fertility level, there is a ground cover that will thrive. Their most important function is to provide a living carpet for bare ground. When ground is left bare, it erodes, especially on slopes. Bare ground also can become infested with weeds (which are nature's own ground cover) and so compacted that neither weeds nor desirable plants can grow.

Some ground covers spread by underground stems called rhizomes. These plants usually make the best type of cover where erosion could be a problem. Others spread by above-ground runners; some of these above-ground runners are good for rocky areas where good soil preparation is difficult. Ground covers can solve landscaping problems, filling crevices in paved walks and patios, covering exposed tree roots, providing a carpet for particularly shady areas, covering rocky or uneven land, and covering steep slopes and banks.

Most plants used as ground covers and lawn substitutes do not stand up well to foot traffic. If the area to be covered needs to withstand frequent foot traffic and cannot support

turfgrass, then use nonliving ground covers such as bricks, rocks, pavers, wood walks and decks, mulches, or stones.

The area to be planted to ground covers should be well prepared, if possible, before planting by tilling of the area and removing or killing all weeds and undesirable vegetation. In areas where the surface cannot be tilled, such as rocky terrain or areas with exposed tree roots, individual planting holes must be dug and organic matter, fertilizer, and other soil amendments mixed into the soil. Space ground cover plants so they will cover the site as quickly as possible. Small plants such as ajuga or vinca can be spaced 8 to 12 inches apart.

Plants used as ground covers vary widely and can include everything from ivies to low-growing spreading shrubs. Massed plants of perennial flowers, such as day lilies, make effective ground covers that provide color at certain times of the year. Before making your selection, find out the growth habit of the ground cover you are interested in. Some are aggressive and can quickly spread out of confined areas. Others are slow growers and are best suited to small spaces. Some vines, such as honeysuckle, can be used as ground cover, but they can also engulf trees, fences, and other objects in the planting bed. Other covers are perennial, meaning they disappear in the winter but come back every spring. Hosta and houttuynia would be examples of perennials that are used sometimes as ground covers.

Plants good for shady areas include ajuga, Asiatic jasmine, English ivy, ferns, liriopse, mondograss, pachysandra, purple wintercreeper, and vinca.

Good ground covers for a sunny spot are the many prostrate junipers, Asiatic jasmine, and purple wintercreeper. Other plants sometimes used are honeysuckle, lantana, phlox, houttuynia, sedums, wood violets, hosta, coral berry, and Virginia creeper.

Most nurseries should have these and other favorites available in a variety of container sizes ready for planting this spring.



Table Grapes ... Can They Be Grown in Texas?

*Dr. Larry Stein, Extension Horticulturist
Uvalde, Texas*



The "new" grape industry in Texas has literally exploded with growth in the last 15 years. This new commercial industry has gone from about 300 acres in 1970 to about 3,500 in 1987. To date, the major thrust of the industry has been wine grapes, and they have performed extremely well in many locations. Of course, Texans have been involved in "home" table grape production, with the 1 or 2 yard-vines, since back when prohibition took out the "old" grape industry.

Certain grapes will perform extremely well in almost every location in the state; 13 of the 26 producing species are native to Texas. Not only do these vines grow freely and profusely without many problems (some problems are the grape leaffolder and skeletonizer) but they make usable grapes as well, and many people make palatable wines and excellent juices and jellies from such berries, though the wines can sometimes be a far cry from those made with the exquisite Chardonnays and Cabernet sauvignons.

A high-quality table grape is a large berry, with a palatable skin and a crisp, sweet flavor. What are the high-quality grape varieties that can be grown in Texas? Some very good table grapes grown in Texas, such as Aurelia and Carolina Blackrose, are excellent, but these particular grapes have seeds. In looking at seedless table grapes, there are generally three different types available, including the California, New York, and Arkansas varieties. Most of us are familiar with the California varieties which have been around for a long time, such as Thompson Seedless and Perlette, and Flame Seedless has really gained in popularity in recent years. New York varieties which have made a fair impact on the industry include Himrod, Suffolk Red, Lakemont, and Romulus. The Arkansas varieties Venus, Mars, and Reliance, are relatively new, but they look promising in many areas.

After varietal selection, other factors to consider in growing table grapes are disease prevention, size, color, and general culture of the vines and clusters, including harvesting and packing. Black rot is probably the most serious problem

affecting grape culture in many locations due to our high temperatures and humidity. No disease damage can be tolerated on the clusters, since we are actually marketing the berries themselves. Control has been achieved where a rigorous spray schedule, with a rotation of chemicals such as Bayleton, Ferbam, and Benlate, has been practiced.

A major problem with many seedless table grapes is developing adequate size. Unfortunately, when the seed is removed, so is the source of hormone for large-berry development. Therefore, normal cultural operations include GA (gibberellic acid) applications and girdling older vines onto certain varieties to increase size. GA sprays must be timed with specific berry development in order to obtain the full benefit from the spray.

Finally, there is the general culture of the vines and clusters. Since nice, uniform, beautiful clusters with eye appeal are important, the clusters should grow free hanging. This allows for expansion of the clusters and air movement to reduce the incidence of disease. It also means tendrils must be removed that could intertwine around the cluster. Often, small, insignificant clusters should be trimmed to allow berry size to increase on remaining clusters. Damaged berries and other imperfections must be removed for optimum marketability. So, there is a large amount of tedious hand labor which goes into the production of high-quality table grapes.

The marketing of grapes is crucial. Since high-quality table grapes require a lot of hand labor, they must receive top dollar in the marketplace in order to be profitable. Unfortunately, certain grapes can give Texas table grapes a bad name if they are not harvested properly. Certain so-called seedless varieties tend to have seed remnants under Texas growing conditions; hence, they must be sold as such. Other varieties need time to develop adequate sugar or they will not taste very good. Some varieties need to be held in cold storage prior to marketing.

There are some very delicious seedless grapes being grown in Texas. These grapes should not be penalized because other grapes were not of adequate quality. Producers must be careful to market their product through the proper channels, under the right conditions, in order to develop a name for our quality table grapes.

Growing Tomatoes No Quick Gardening Task

Robert "Skip" Richter, County Extension Agent
Montgomery County, Texas

To many Texans, gardening means growing tomatoes. Growing tomatoes in the backyard can be a fascinating and rewarding venture or it can be a very frustrating one.

A sickly tomato plant which produces few, if any, fruit certainly doesn't boost anyone's gardening enthusiasm. For home owners growing tomatoes for the first time, some simple advice might help avoid common pitfalls.

First, home gardeners should not grow tomatoes unless the plants can be placed in an area that receives sunlight for at least six hours a day. Tomato plants placed between tall shrubs, under trees, or between buildings simply will not produce maximum yields.

Second, good soil is essential for good growth and high yields. Often, poor soil can be improved with liberal amounts of organic matter and by proper fertilization. A dark, heavy clay or even a fine sand can be improved by working 3 to 4 inches of decomposed organic matter into the soil where the tomatoes are to be planted.

If only a few tomato plants are to be grown, a space at least 2 feet square should be prepared for each plant. The soil should be worked to a depth of at least 12 inches. Raised beds work well. Liberal amounts of organic matter and a small amount of fertilizer, such as 10-20-10 or 12-24-12, should be mixed into the soil where the plant is to be grown.

Variety selection is of utmost importance and is one of the keys to growing tomatoes successfully. Select varieties that resist many of the common diseases. Look for VFN after a variety name; this indicates that it has resistance to verticillium wilt, fusarium wilt, and nematodes. President, Celebrity, Big Boy, Champion (a good warm-weather producer), or the small-fruited Sweet 100 are top producers in Montgomery County.

The new varieties Donna, First Lady, and Viva Italia (a paste type) also show promise. Other old-time favorites exist and may also perform well.

Plants can be started at home, although at this time in the season it is best to purchase transplants at local nurseries. When buying plants, the home gardener should look for healthy,

vigorous transplants. When the transplants are set in the garden, use a starter solution to assure adequate fertility during the early stages of growth. Starter solutions can be purchased at local garden centers, or they can be made by mixing one tablespoon of a complete garden fertilizer in a gallon of water. About one cup of the starter solution should be applied in the planting hole prior to planting.

For best results, the transplants should be set in the garden on cloudy days or late in the afternoon. The plants should be protected from adverse conditions such as high winds or cold temperatures for a week or so after transplanting. Cages, wrapped in row-cover fabric, can be used to control temperatures for a week or so after transplanting. Covering the plants with milk cartons also works well.

Almost all tomato varieties should be staked, trellised, or caged for best results. Any method is good if it keeps the fruit off the ground. Fruits allowed to contact the soil often develop fruit rot. People who would like to grow tomatoes but lack the space should try growing them in a five-gallon container. Better Bush is a short, stocky variety well adapted to container growing.



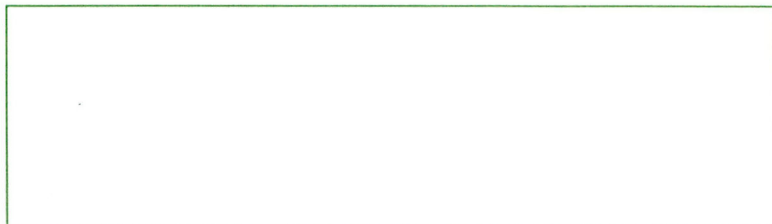


Garden Checklist for March

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

- ☒ Prepare beds for planting warm-season flowers and vegetables.
- ☒ For every 100 square feet of bed area, work in a 2- to 3-inch layer of organic material such as compost, pine bark, or sphagnum peat moss.
- ☒ Select and order caladium tubers as well as geranium and coleus plants for late April and early May planting. Do not plant caladiums until soil temperature reaches 70 degrees F.
- ☒ As camellia and azalea plants finish blooming, fertilize them with 3 pounds of azalea-camellia fertilizer per 100 square feet of bed area.
- ☒ Check mulch on azalea and camellia plantings and add where needed. Consider using pine needles, pine bark, or similar organic materials.
- ☒ Beware of closeout sales on bare-root trees and shrubs. The chance of survival is rather low on bare-root plants this late in the season. Best bets for now are container-grown or balled-and-burlapped plants.
- ☒ Remember that many trees and shrubs are damaged or killed each year by the careless application of weed killers, including those found in mixes of fertilizers and weed killers. Always read and follow label directions very carefully. Weeds in a lawn usually indicate a poor lawn-management program and can usually be crowded out in a healthy turf.
- ☒ Start hanging baskets of petunias and other annuals for another dimension in landscape color.
- ☒ Freeze-damaged beds of Asiatic jasmine ground cover should be sheared back just as new growth starts to encourage new growth from the base.
- ☒ For early color in the landscape, try some of the following annuals as transplants: ageratums, cockscombs, coreopsis, cosmos, cleomes, marigolds, nasturtiums, petunias, phlox, portulacas, salvias, sweet alyssums, sunflowers, and zinnias.
- ☒ Divide existing clumps of fall-blooming perennials, such as chrysanthemums, autumn asters, Mexican marigold-mint, and physostegia (obedient plant).





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Coming Events

Landscape Design Study Course III - April 16-18, 1996

This series of four 2-day classes is co-sponsored by Texas Garden Clubs, Inc., and the Texas Agricultural Extension Service. Faculty from the departments of Landscape Architecture, Horticultural Sciences, and Wildlife Sciences, as well as professionals from park services, landscape planning, and construction firms will provide interesting and useful programs that are sanctioned by the National Council of State Garden Clubs. Participation is open to the public and includes garden club members, nurserymen, civic leaders, and others interested in learning more about what constitutes good landscape architectural design. The courses are conducted at the College Station Community Center. Registration information may be obtained from Extension Horticulture (409) 845-7341.

April 10 & 11, 1996: Landscape Irrigation Auditing & Management Training, El Paso. For more information, contact David Smith (409) 845-5614.

April 19 & 20, 1996: Texas Master Gardener Advanced Training Seminar, Granbury. For more information contact Doug Welsh, (409) 845-7341.

April 22 & 23, 1996: Landscape Irrigation Auditing & Management Training, El Paso. For more information, contact David Smith (409) 845-5614.

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