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TARRANT COUNTY

# Master Gardeners

**A community of gardeners, learning and sharing best practices in north Texas.**

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**Master Gardeners receive many hours of specialized training in horticulture through the Texas AgriLife Extension Service. The trained volunteers then contribute time in their communities on special projects and community gardens. To learn more about becoming a Master Gardener, visit [www.tarrantmg.org](http://www.tarrantmg.org)**

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# WATER CONSERVATION



By Patsy Miller

North Texans love our lush, green lawns, but watering our lawns accounts for more than half of all the water we use at home. And the experts say most lawns get twice as much water as they really need. Just checking out your neighborhood, you will see water gushing down the curb, broken sprinkler heads looking like geysers or sprinklers going full force during a downpour.

Here in North Texas, we depend on a system of reservoirs constructed by Tarrant Regional Water District (TRWD) to meet the needs of almost 2 million people across an 11-county area. A region that is expected to double in the next 50 years.

In this area, over 90 percent of water supplies come from surface water resources. Texas has about 500 times more water underground than anything sitting on the surface. In fact, all the water in Texas rivers and lakes makes up only 0.2 percent of the water in the state.

But we can't depend on rain to fill those rivers and lakes. Drought has become a part of life in North Texas. A climate study by the First Street Foundation, a climate assessment nonprofit, has marked Texas as part of the Extreme Heat Belt, an area of the U.S. highly vulnerable to extreme heat in coming years.

For that reason, TRWD and many other municipal water utilities are relying on water conservation to meet future water needs. And it begins in our homes and yards.

Watering efficiently means using only as much water as needed to keep our plants healthy. Too much water can be as harmful as not enough water. Manual watering controllers such as rain sensors or soil moisture sensors. Revise your watering schedule to seasonal changes. And don't water if it has just rained.

The best time to water is early in the morning or late in the evening – before 10 a.m. or after 6 p.m. when it is cooler. Watering in the heat of the day loses up to 30 per cent of the water lost to evaporation. Soaker hoses and drip irrigation systems deliver water directly to the plant's roots and help minimize evaporation loss.

The real secret to a lush lawn is deep roots. Deep roots and a more drought-tolerant lawn are encouraged by spacing out the irrigation days to no more than two days a week, and even less if it has rained. It is common in lawn areas, and our clay soils, for the watering system to apply water faster than our lawns can absorb it. This encourages shallow roots because the water stays close to the surface.

Use the Cycle and Soak Irrigation Method where you water each station in two or three short cycles instead of one long cycle. Set the multiple cycles 30 to 60 minutes apart to allow the water to soak into the soil between cycles. You can use the same method if you are hand watering, by spacing out the watering times.

Find more information on proper watering, system maintenance and all things water at [waterisawesome.com](http://waterisawesome.com), provided by Tarrant Regional Water District. There you can sign up for the free Weekly Watering Advice email that comes each Monday with how much to water that week.

Consider reducing your lawn area by replacing it with native and adapted plants that use less water, like the heat and attract butterflies, bees and hummingbirds. If you want to expand your water efficient landscaping, there are plenty of choices of plants, shrubs, vines and trees to consider. Go to <https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu> and [www.txsmartscape.com](http://www.txsmartscape.com) to get you started. Also, a good source is the Native Plant Society of Texas <https://npsot.org/>

# KIDS IN THE GARDEN



By Trina Gibbs, Mother and Grandmother  
Master Gardener and former Mansfield ISD Teacher

Gardening with kids and grandchildren can be a rewarding learning experience. As parents, we take our kids to all of their school and extracurricular activities, but are we actively introducing our kids, teenagers and grandchildren to meaningful activities at home that can sustain them for life? Planting flower beds, vegetable gardening and doing general yard care are important life skills, on par with cooking, cleaning, car maintenance and other valuable experiences.

Kids learn best if they have been with you while you are working in your yard and garden. My two young grandkids, ages 3 and 1, love following me around the yard. They especially love smelling the lavender and rosemary in my pots or pulling a basil leaf out of my raised garden beds. Watching me and helping me weed, water, mow and plant is laying the needed framework to build an interest in gardening. Simply taking your kids of all ages to buy flowers, shrubs and other plants can pique an interest in getting started. Nurseries are beautiful places, and we often take trips to Botanic Garden for inspiration.

After the above “seed” is planted, the next step is to actively have your kids help you plant or sustain a garden. There are great reading sources and learning toys to share with your younger kids, and kid-sized watering cans and gloves are a must. With the younger kids, easier and shorter work time is needed. Starting around the age of 3, kids can plant vegetable or flower seeds in a single small pot or several seeds in a large pot. Most grocery stores sell seeds, so read the labels for sun and watering, and while you are at the store, take your kids over to see what the vegetable could look like when grown.



The older child and teenager can really add fun and needed knowledge to your garden and yard. As a former 8th grade teacher, my students were always ready for challenging projects. The technology-savvy child can research a plant or vegetable, help you design a new garden project, and figure out and organize when and what to plant.

Success is important but even if you just start a project or the garden fails, that effort can be a great learning experience. Start again and plan a new garden for the next season. Is there a spot for your child to start a garden or could your teenager add an annual plant for every season? As a parent or a grandparent, start thinking now about a once-a-week or even once-a-month garden project for your special kids. Take the time to lead and plant the “seeds” for a lifetime experience.

## BOTANIC GARDEN VEGGIES



By: Kelly Perry

When I moved to North Texas, I had no idea how to plant vegetables for this type of climate. Yes, I know you know what I'm talking about. Many of us have the greatest motivation to plant, and we build our beds and start the work, but we find ourselves with Texas and its climate. We immediately get frustrated, and at that point we must decide: leave it or learn.

That is how I met the Tarrant County Master Gardeners. Thanks to this great organization, you can find a magical place in the middle of the city, full of vegetables, with the smell of earth in the morning and a fresh breeze. I fell in love with the Backyard Vegetable Garden (BVG), located in the Fort Worth Botanic Garden (FWBG). The Vegetable Garden is a demonstration garden and is used for school programs to show children where vegetables and fruits come from. The garden also is used to demonstrate to Botanic Garden visitors what can be grown in North Texas. The harvests are divided between food banks, volunteers and staff.

The BVG was a great school for me. It is a place where anyone with or without experience can learn something new from horticulturist Agnes Slociak Knasiak, PhD in Agriculture Science in Agronomy, and Greenhouse Operations Manager. Agnes is great with the volunteers because she is an open book and is always willing to patiently teach the volunteers. She knows a lot, and she loves what she does. Other volunteers who have planted in Texas for years are also there, and they know how, when and what to plant during each season of the year. Volunteers also learn to recognize pests and diseases in plants, which is of great importance to prevent or combat them both within the BVG and at home.

As a volunteer, you can be part of the entire BVG production process, which is like a circle. Agnes decides what to plant depending on the season of the year and which vegetable is best for each season. She makes a calendar and a map of the garden where she marks each bed she is going to plant with a date so she can have the vegetables ready. Most of the BVG plants start in the greenhouse where Agnes teaches you how to start a mother pot with some seeds and grow seedlings that will later become the plant you will harvest in a few months. When the harvest ends, the beds are cleaned, and that material goes to the compost outpost. It later returns to the garden in the form of soil. Then the cycle starts again. If that is not magical, I don't know what is.

Being able to feel the fresh earth between my hands when I plant in the BVG and seeing how the plants grow until harvest time has been one of the greatest experiences of my life. Pruning and starting again with another cycle is incredible. There is always something to do in the garden, even if it is just cleaning out weeds. It is hard work, but yields a great reward, such as a full basket of tomatoes, potatoes, green leaves for the salad, zucchini, squash, okra, herbs and more.

The BVG is many things: It is a school in every sense and a place to work hard. It is also a place to find wisdom from Agnes and other gardeners. But especially, it is a place where we can be in contact with Mother Earth, a place where we can be with our thoughts and find peace. There is no greater blessing than bringing to your table something that you and your friends lovingly planted, tended and harvested.

I invite you to be part of the volunteers who go to the Vegetable Garden. Usually the workdays are 8 a.m. – 12 p.m., on Fridays, but these days may vary depending on the weather. Contact the Tarrant County Master Gardening desk at 817-884 -1944 to confirm working days.

# INSECT HOTELS



By John Cheney

Insect hotels, also known as bug hotels and insect houses, are manmade structures used for the shelter of pollinating and beneficial insects. The houses can be made in any shape and size for different purposes and specific insects. Insect hotels are liked especially by gardeners and farmers because they encourage pollinators, such as wild bees, butterflies and ladybird beetles, also known as ladybugs.

## **Why Have an Insect Hotel?**

The main goal of an insect hotel is to house pollinators. They also act as nest sites for hibernating solitary bees and wasps. Only five percent of bees live in hives, while 95 percent of bees are solitary bees. Mason and leaf cutter bees are the most prevalent bee occupants of an insect hotel. These insects drag their prey into the nest where an egg is placed.

## **More Benefits of Insect Hotels**

Insect hotels also contribute to a reduction in bad bugs. Approximately 10 percent of the occupants of the insect hotel will be bad bugs, but the beneficial insects in the hotel will keep them in check. Insect hotels can attract predatory insects which help control unwanted bugs. Thus, the ecosystem diversity is enhanced when multiple bug species overwinter in an insect hotel.



Insect Hotels also offer better soil quality. As pollinators propagate gardens and flowers, when the season is over, the decomposing waste creates better soil.

### **Build Your Own**

You need at least one hotel to help pollinate your plants. When you build your own insect hotel, you are only limited by your imagination and inner artistic ability. We encourage you to use recycled materials to build your own, or you can purchase one online or in a garden center.

Using different materials encourages different beneficial insects to nest in your Insect Hotel. Great materials to use include stone, ceramic materials, straw, cardboard, branches, wood, logs, bark, pine cones, bamboo and most natural materials. Some species also like to furnish their nests with clay, stone or sand.

The tube diameter should be 10mm, and the length should be 10cm. The holes should tilt up toward the back to allow water to drain out, and it is good to have an overhang to keep water out. A sturdy slanted roof, made of metal, glass, tin, asbestos shingles, or license plates is recommended. Chicken wire placed over the open side of the Insect Hotel keeps birds from eating the residents. A southern exposure is best for the open side of the Insect Hotel.

### **Encourage Diversity**

To attract earwigs, you also may use a terracotta flower pot turned upside down, filled with straw or wool. Ladybirds like twigs within an open area. Isopods, a crustacean bug from the order Isopoda, such as pill bugs, are good scavengers for the garden. Some insects like large gaps between stacked bricks and roof tiles to shelter from rain and hide from predators.

In general Insect Hotels are a positive force in the yard or garden. Building Insect Hotels aids the pollinators and helps keep recycled materials from going to the dump. Join the growing Insect Hotel movement and build an innovative one for your yard.

# DIAGNOSING PLANTS



By Loretta Bailey

Have you worked tirelessly in your garden, braving the hot and humid weather, only to discover your beloved plants chewed on, browning or withering away? We have all dealt with this frustration at one time or another. The best approach to preventing this situation is to have a plan and work with nature. I'll share some important tips that have benefited my yard and has made gardening a lot easier.

## **Be a Plant Detective**

Discovering problems in the garden early can save you time, money and frustration. Spend a few minutes each morning, while enjoying your cup of coffee, browsing and inspecting your garden. If you see insect damage, you can manually remove a few insects or use a jet spray from your hose. If you see problems such as powdery mildew, it is much easier to remove a few infested leaves than to treat an entire sick tree. For disease identification, a free online resource and app is called [iNaturalist](#). Simply take a picture, upload it, and a community of scientists and gardeners will help guide you. This app also can help you identify mystery plants, weeds and insects.



### **Insects in the Garden**

Years ago, as a young gardener, I am embarrassed to say that I used to dash to the big box stores to purchase chemicals to kill whatever insect was feasting on my plants' leaves. As a more mature and educated gardener these days, I have learned to appreciate and actually smile at seeing some chewed up leaves. Why? I'm helping to feed nature. Your plants are helping to fatten up those grasshoppers and caterpillars to feed hungry baby birds, toads and lizards. Remember, our yards are meant to be shared with nature, so look at your yard as nature's kitchen. Avoid using toxic chemicals to kill insects, if at all possible, as you're most likely also killing off beneficial insects that are there to help you suppress the "bad" insects. Try to remember, it's harmless, organic, free and easy to trim away the unsightly, severely torn leaves.

### **The Importance of Plant Labels**

Don't ignore that plant label. Select plants that are suited for your planting area, whether it is full sun, part sun or shade. Don't try to prove nature wrong by planting the wrong plant in the wrong place, or you'll end up wasting money and building frustration. Be sure to keep your plant labels in an old shoe box or use a hole punch tool and keep your labels secured by a key ring. You'll be able to keep track of which plants did well or failed in your yard.

### **Heat and Drought Tolerant Plants and Where to Find Them**

Here in North Texas, we know our summers get brutally hot and dry. Does it make sense to purchase thirsty, exotic and needy plants? We know the answer to this question, yet I constantly see consumers at local nurseries choosing high-maintenance plants, only to see them decline or die during our hot summers. Save your money and avoid frustration by investing in Texas natives and adapted plants that will survive the brutal summers and return gloriously year after year. Walking into a garden center can be daunting and confusing for an inexperienced gardener, so for plant selection guidance, visit websites such as [Texas SmartScape](#) and look at their plant database for everything from ground covers to trees. [Native Plant Society of Texas](#) has a wonderful list of native plants on their website, including a list of local retail stores that carry native plants. Another great online resource for hardy plants is [Texas Superstar's](#) website.

### **Tarrant County Master Gardener Helpline and Additional Resources**

If you need additional help or guidance, give us a call at (817) 884-1944 or email us at [tarrantmg@ag.tamu.edu](mailto:tarrantmg@ag.tamu.edu). Be sure to give us a good description of your plant (pictures are great), what you discovered, your current plant care routine and any other information to help us assist you. Be sure to visit our website at [tcmga.org](http://tcmga.org) to browse our schedule of educational events and for a plethora of gardening information.

# GARDENING AT ANY AGE



By Nancy O'Malley

Arthritis in the hands. Sore knees that make it hard to get up and down. Muscles that don't lift 40-pound bags of mulch easily. These are some of the physical limitations many of us encounter as we get older. Even when retirement allows time to renew a passion for gardening, aches and pains can get in the way. Gardening provides so many benefits to the body, soul and spirit, that it is worth examining some ways to work around physical challenges.

## **Find New Tools**

When arthritis affects the joints in the hands, simple jobs like pruning and digging can be really painful. Local nurseries and online garden stores sell a variety of helpful tools, such as pruners in ergonomic designs and right-sized for ease when making repetitive cuts. Ergonomic weeders, diggers and long-handled hoes are a few of the tools that can be found on Amazon, Gardeners Supply Company, Johnny's Selected Seeds and at local suppliers.

I recently bought a garden sled for pulling around plants and bags of heavy compost and mulch. When I can get my grandsons out of it, that sled has made many chores much easier, and I can be more independent in my work. A garden bench and kneeler with sturdy handles makes getting up and down easier, and most are portable for storage. I even discovered a robotic lawn mower, another option for those with balance and mobility difficulties, but who still have a lawn to mow.



## Build Elevated Gardens

The Master Gardener demonstration garden at 1800 Circle Drive offers a look at a variety of elevated beds. The beds allow for good drainage in the clay soil, but they also accommodate gardeners with reaching and bending challenges. Some of the beds are high enough to allow a wheelchair to roll underneath, taking the “chore” out of plan harvesting. Why reach and bend low when beds can be brought up to waist level?

## Get Some Help

In a recent conversation with long-time gardener Bill Shaw, 80, he said he doesn't use anything fancy, just basic tools. He has been gardening since he was a teenager, he said, caring for a large garden in Connecticut on the weekends, and he raised vegetables with his family back in the 1950s. He also lived in Thailand in his early retirement years, so he has gardened in varied environments. Now living at Stevenson Oaks, a Methodist Retirement Community in south Fort Worth, he chairs the gardening committee there. His health is good, he said, despite having lung cancer a few years ago. Though he has never suffered from arthritis, he doesn't have the stamina or muscle strength that he used to have. So how does he adjust? He paces himself. He uses elevated planters and a kneeling pad. And most importantly, he gets help when he needs it. Others now do the heavy lifting, like moving dirt and other heavy chores so he doesn't have to. Bill says gardening has always been important to him. It is very therapeutic, he said, and it is his quiet time. Gardening offers great benefits at any age.



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