

Tarrant County Master Gardeners



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Electronic Field Guides or Plant ID Apps

By Nancy O'Malley

Out in a big pasture recently, I saw a beautiful plant I had never seen before, so I whipped out my phone, clicked on my PictureThis app and snapped a photo. Within five seconds, I was a smarter, happier observer of the natural world. I learned that I was looking at Scorpion's Tail, also known as Turnsole, or Heliotropes. It has long lavender flowers, grows in full sun, and can be toxic. Much more detailed information spilled out of this little app, such as this plant can be invasive and found across the southern U.S.

I use my PictureThis app many times a week, both in cultivated gardens and out in the wild. Measured by cost per use, I think the \$29.99 annual fee is a steal. While this is my favorite plant identification app because it is so accurate and easy to use, many other apps are available. With so many options, what is the best one?

In my quick research for this article, I found the following apps listed most often:

iNaturalist is a social network of citizen scientists around the world who share information and help each other learn about nature. Users can take photos, upload their observations, and other users then confirm or improve the identification of plants, animals, tracks, invasive species, fungi and more. As of September 2022, iNaturalist users had contributed more than 115 million observations. This well-known app is free.

Seek uses data submitted to iNaturalist, but unlike iNaturalist, findings made with Seek will not be shared publicly, making it safe for children to use. Seek is geared to encourage outdoor exploration of wild biodiversity (rather than pets, zoo animals, or garden plants). The app also is free.

Pl@ntNet is another great app for quick and accurate plant identification. It does not allow extensive sharing of your findings like some of the other apps and doesn't provide as much detailed information. Accuracy is improved if the plant leaf is photographed on a white background.

LeafSnap offers plant and tree identification features, as well as information about how to care for your plants. The app is free but is only available on iPhones.

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PlantIdentification is another plant, tree and flower id app that is fast, and simple to use. Snap a quick picture of a diseased plant from different angles, and this app should help with a quick diagnosis and treatment advice.

PlantIdentify, PlantSnap, iPlant, Garden Answers, FlowerChecker, Garden Compass, Plantix, and What's That Flower are just a few of the many other apps available. These electronic field guides have become popular, helpful tools to build our knowledge as botanists, naturalists and master gardeners, so do some experimenting to find the best tool for you. However, testing the apps and comparing their features wasn't as easy as I had hoped, because pricing was confusing on many of the apps. While several are truly "free," many other "free" apps require you to register and provide credit card information so you can be billed at the end of the trial period. You can cancel later, but you will have to remember to do that, so the "free" teaser wasn't entirely accurate. Also, some apps are only available on Android devices, and some are only offered on iOS. Accuracy, speed and the size of data base will differ also, so just do your research or ask other fellow master gardeners which apps they like the best. One last thought: a plant ID app is like a scavenger hunt for kids. They love to grab the phone and learn more about all the plants around them. It is a great tool to make them enthusiastic nature explorers.

A Note from Lorie

Hello everyone! It has been my pleasure to produce the Tarrant County Master Gardeners Newsletter for six years. It is now time to pass the reins to someone else! This will be the last Newsletter that will come from me, but I would be so happy to help transition this to a new Master Gardener. If this is something that tickles your fancy, please reach out to me.

An enormous thank you to those who have helped and contributed over the years, especially Theresa Thomas, Patsy Miller and ET.

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Mulch

By Terry Anseman

Cooler weather has finally arrived in North Central Texas. Personally my favorite time of year - gardening, football, gumbo and Halloween!

As far as gardening it is the time to clean up the beds, remove plants damaged by the long, brutally hot summer, rejuvenation of past year's perennials and preparation for new plantings. In preparation of the beds a decision regarding mulch selection is paramount and not as simple as it sounds. There are many choices available - bark, chipper debris, compost, leaves, pine needles, inorganic mulches and landscaping fabrics to name a few. The decision regarding which mulch for your garden needs to take into account - the purpose, HOA restrictions, water conservation, soil amendments, protection from weather elements.... When living in Louisiana my personal choice was pine straw. I found it to be easy to use, affordable and beneficial for the soil. Now that I am in Texas I am moving towards using hardwood mulch, though not completely sold on this decision.

Information derived from Earth-Kind Texas Agrilife Extension Service promotes mulch as "one of the best methods of growing healthy plants and conserving water". They suggest a 3-4 inch layer of organic mulch to reduce weed growth, water evaporation, rain splash and runoff and enrich soil nutrients. Organic mulches typically need to be replenished every 6 months. With water conservation on everyone's mind the use of mulch, drought resistant plants and natives ensures a modicum of water conservation and a beautification of our environment.

We're Surrounded!

As many of you know, I got hooked on studying insects many years ago. Recently I was given a new book on insects explaining why we need insects. I am sharing with you the very first paragraph:

"There are more than 200 million insects for every human being living on the planet today. As you sit reading this sentence, between 1 quadrillion and 10 quadrillion insects are shuffling and crawling and flapping around on the planet, outnumbering the grains of sand on all the world's beaches. Like it or not, they have you surrounded, because Earth is the planet of the insects."

Enjoy, ET