

Tarrant County Master Gardeners



TEXAS A & M AGRILIFE EXTENSION

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Ornamental Grasses at the Demonstration Garden

By Nancy OMalley

Tarrant County Master Gardeners are required to work in the Demo Garden each year, but you may not have ventured all the way back to the far-right corner of the garden, where ornamental grasses are the focal point. Created by the 2010 intern class and now led by master gardener Donna Parikka, the area is lush with grassy textures, year-round color and motion, which are atypical features in other areas of the Demo Garden. Ornamental grasses are especially useful in our North Texas soils and climate, for they are low maintenance, drought tolerant, durable and low cost. By replacing some plants with ornamental grasses, it is easy to revive an old-fashioned landscape. Grasses deserve a closer look in all of our gardens.

Donna Parikka agreed to be the lead for this unique area in the Demo Garden after retiring as an accountant in 2021. A member of the 2018 Mod Squad Class and now a master gardener, she has learned how to incorporate ornamental grasses into her own yard, now full of Texas native and adapted plants. Her favorite grass is the Mexican feather grass because “of its movement in the wind and its size. I also like the sideoats grama, as it is the state grass of Texas,” she said. Ornamental grasses create a naturalized look – a growing trend in meadow, woodland and prairie landscape styles. They can be used in an all-grass minimalist landscape, but most gardeners combine grasses with perennials and other native plants. They are also uniquely suited to the EarthKind objectives of less water, fertilizer, insecticides and herbicides.



Above photos taken by Nancy OMalley show garden lead Donna Parikka and the movement of one of the grasses.

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Ornamental Grasses continued

Donna plans to add more grass specimens, such as fountain grass and blue grama, and increase companion plantings at the Demo Garden to show how these versatile grasses can be used in residential landscapes. They can be used as a single specimen or in a mass planting, as well as a ground cover, border or screen. Varying in size from four inches to more than seven feet, they can soften foundations, sidewalks, decks and other hardscapes.

While ornamental grasses are cost-effective and suited to our current and growing environmental challenges, they aren't completely trouble-free, Donna said. Some grasses, particularly Bluestem and Indian grass, are particularly invasive due to their spreading form and reseeding habits, which is a great feature in a natural prairie, but is challenging in a demonstration garden or residential landscape. Regular weeding is required to keep the grasses under control, particularly on the crushed granite path running through the demo garden. The grasses also need to be pruned once a year around February before spring growth starts, and the clumps should be dug out and divided when the center dies back. To control unwanted spreading by rhizomes, many of the original grasses in the Demo Garden were planted in containers with the bottom removed. Most grasses need a sunny spot to thrive, she said.

Come February, Donna will cut the grasses back to the ground and plans to dig up and divide several overgrown specimens. She hopes to prepare a video of the process and also will present a virtual class this September to show other master gardeners how grasses can be used in our North Texas landscapes.

Photos on Page 2 and 3 are by Donna Parikka



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Ornamental Grasses continued

Volunteers are always welcome back in the far corner of the Demo Garden, and Donna can be found there most Tuesdays, weather permitting, surrounded by the wind-blown movement of the grasses. If you'd like to come and have a hands-on experience with grasses, email or text her to be sure she will be there. See if you can spot these varieties in the Demo Garden:

Big Bluestem

Little Bluestem

Sideoats Grama

Switch Grass

Yellow Indian Grass

Mexican Feather Grass

Lindheimer Muhly

Gulf Muhly (aka Pink Muhly)

White Cloud Muhly

Pine Muhly

Seep Muhly

Hooded Windmill Grass

Purple Three Awn

Maiden Grass



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Tyrannical Weeds Of Southwest Sub-Courthouse

By Dawn Hancock

All gardeners know that time spent with Mother Nature in the garden over several years provides the benefits of bringing forth from our efforts the desired natural beauty of well-designed landscapes, but it has the added bonus of teaching the gardener about weeds. Let's first define a weed. My treasured flower may be your weed. As some have said about the subject, "A weed is a plant that is out of place and unwanted." So, it's subjective.

At Southwest Sub-courthouse native plant garden there are two categories of weed. One is what I will call 'you will always find some of me here somewhere'. The native poinsettia *Euphorbia dentata* falls in this category. *Poor little thing, it's so ugly. Every year, without fail, it welcomes the gardener in early spring. We know it well, have weeded it to exhaustion and yet, the drab little poinsettia returns.*

The second category is what I will call the, 'oh my goodness, I've never seen this before and it's taking over the whole garden!'. My first example is native creeping cucumber *Melothria pendula*. We encountered it after several wet springs. Texas, the state of unpredictable weather, will have those years of abundant rain when every imaginable plant form bursts from the soil. And so, it burst. Creeping cucumber is a spindly vine with wispy English ivy like leaves and tiny hanging melon shaped fruits that scrambles across terrain covering all in its path. To its credit though, according to eattheweeds.com, it is edible. It is described as having a definite cucumber aroma and taste. However, some say the fruit is poisonous when black and overripe. I will never know.

The second scoundrel is hoary bowlesia, *Bowlesia incana*, a smallish native plant with several stems rising from a single rosette. Its light green leaves have five major lobes with indentations along the edge. This one popped up after rainy winter years. I guess "popped up" does not describe its presence. "Popped up" sounds like here a few, there a few. On the contrary, this weed hid under every other desirable plant in the garden forcing us gardeners to take plants to the ground (good-bye Henry Duelberg salvia) to rout it out. But here's the thing...according to foragingtexas.com, it's also edible. It sort of looks like cilantro and is in the same family with cilantro, the carrot family. Some say it has a similar taste. Here I can attest to the veracity of this statement. Having tasted it myself, my palate registered a barely discernable taste of cilantro. Better to grow cilantro.

Back to Mother Nature's lessons about weeds. Some may have value if you are brave enough to try to nibble them.

Photos left to right:

Euphorbia dentata
Melothria pendula
Bowlesia incana



Bug Bites

Submitted by Eleanor Tuck

More than two billion people around the world regularly consume insects—a good source of protein, vitamins, minerals, and healthy fats. UW—Madison researchers have documented, for the first time, the health effects of eating them. Their clinical trial, which had participants eat crickets ground up in breakfast shakes, shows that consuming the insects can help support the growth of beneficial gut bacteria. Researchers also found that eating the insects is not only safe but may also reduce inflammation in the body.

“Food is very tied to culture, and 20 or 30 years ago no one in the US was eating sushi because we thought it was disgusting, but now you can get it at a gas station in Nebraska,” says Valerie Stull, PhD’18, the study’s lead author and a postdoctoral researcher with the UW’s Global Health Institute.

Kelly April Tyrrell, MS’11



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Pets and Gardens

By Terry Anseman

It's a beautiful day for gardening, so you head out to enjoy the yard and your pup joins you. As a responsible gardener and pet owner you have two obligations:

- 1 - keep your animal safe from poisonous plants, snakes and pools.
- 2 - keep your plants safe from your animal.

In reference to plants, assume all are poisonous - no do not allow your pup to snack while in the garden. Your pet will not discriminate poisonous versus non poisonous, so all plants should be considered toxic. The easiest defense is barriers, but pups have been known to eat vegetation growing through a fence. Remember young puppies will chew on anything from shoes to oleander and sago palms, so they are vulnerable to such temptations. The most common toxic plants for your pets include: sago palms, oleander, Lily of the valley, castor bean and marijuana. This is but a short list, so go to resources online for a more extensive list. Below are several useful resources if you are concerned your animal has ingested a toxic plant:

Your local veterinarian

ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center Phone Number: (888) 426-4435

be.chewy.com

Pet Poison Hotline (855-764-7661)

Symptoms of poisonous/toxic plant ingestion include: vomiting, diarrhea, seizures, muscle twitching, lethargy, breathing difficulties, and coma to name a few.

Over the years I have enjoyed both my garden and my pups; therefore, I have a few tricks to assist you in protecting both, plus tips from others:

- 1 - fence in your garden area or fence in a dog area, such as an outdoor kennel.
- 2 - chicken wire laid under the mulch will deter most dogs, cats and sometimes squirrels from ravishing your plants and digging.
- 3 - crushed red pepper as a deterrent has been successful, for most of my animals, when sprinkled generously around the border. BUT there is always one animal that doesn't mind the pepper. The deterrent will need to be reapplied after a rain and sprinkler watering. Once your animal associates an area as noxious they usually do not continue to investigate it, so you won't have to reapply for the lifetime of your garden or pet.
- 4 - training avoidance takes time and consistency, but is an excellent tool for pet owners to eliminate certain problematic behavior.

Pets and Gardens continued

5 - motion activated sprinklers - I have not tried but have been told this works as long as you don't have a water dog like my Newfoundland.

5 - placing toys in the garden - doesn't work for me because my dogs bury toys and chewies in the garden whenever possible, especially my Cavalier.

6 - setting aside a designated digging area, such as a sand pit. My dogs love to dig in sand, but the neighborhood cats find it an appealing litter box.

Personally I believe fencing and training avoidance to be the best techniques to avoid plant-dog conflicts.

If your animal has ingested toxic material:

Firstly - if possible identify the plant, because the veterinarian and helpline may ask you what specific plant was ingested.

Call your local veterinarian.

Call one of the hotlines listed above.

In reference to snakes - keep your garden debris to a minimum and investigate whenever your animal is overly interested in an area atypical for them. If you are in an area frequented by snakes, check if your vet carries antivenin.

Occasionally you may find a training class to teach your animal to avoid contact with snakes. I have seen this training utilized, especially for hunting dogs in Louisiana

If bitten, take your animal to the vet immediately.

As an aside - if you have a swimming pool, please teach your animal how to reach the steps or ramp to exit the pool. Remember not all dogs know how to swim, but if they do they could swim in circles until exhausted and drown. Statistics report over 5,000 dogs drown every year in backyard pools.

Pets and gardens can be a wonderful and relaxing avocation with a little preparation.

