



Dear Friends,

This is the 8th issue of our weekly gardening newsletter for Houston, the Gulf Coast and beyond. This a project of The Lazy Gardener, Brenda Beust Smith, John Ferguson and Mark Bowen (both John and Mark are with Nature's Way Resources). We also have a great cast of contributing writers who will chime in regularly. We would love to keep receiving your input on this newsletter . . . . comments . . . . suggestions . . . . questions. . . .Email your thoughts to: [lazygardenerandfriends@gmail.com](mailto:lazygardenerandfriends@gmail.com). Thanks so much for your interest.

Please .

Enjoy!

**OXALIS, FAIRY GARDENS AND A BLOOMING ALOE!**



Oxalis (clover) clockwise from upper left: common pink, darker two-toned pink, 'butterfly' oxalis, white St. Patrick oxalis and purple oxalis

BY BRENDA BEUST SMITH

I know this column is going to upset some of you.

Sorry.

But I love oxalis.

I love the happy little native pink flowers with the clover leaves that cover our lawn and garden in the spring.

Okay, so the common pinks are a bit prolific. And don't look so great when they start to disappear . . . which they always do once the temperatures start to rise in late May.

But other varieties, such as those pictured above - the darker two-tone pink, purple-leafed and white - make neat

mounds that just get larger and more colorful over the years.

And there are lots more noninvasive varieties of this wonderful shade plant that's also known as wood sorrel or shamrocks.

Although they're perfect for brightening shady areas, oxalis can take sun too. My purple flowered ones and the darker pinks will last longer into the summer.

I do understand if you are among readers like Darlene who find the little common pink ones entirely TOO invasive in spring and don't want to wait until they disappear in late May.

To Darlene, who wrote asking for get-rid-of-'em advice, I suggested gathering all those nicely-bagged leaves her neighbors are putting out for the garbagemen and dump them on top oxalis in her gardens.

These will:

1. stop oxalis and other weeds (especially if you put 2-3 layers of newspaper over open soil before dumping on the mulch)
2. keep the soil cooler and more moist all summer
3. break down and replenish her soil with composted nutrients more nutritious and better for her soil than anything she can buy.

The common pink oxalis bulbs are like mosquitoes. There's no way you're going to totally eradicate them once they become established.

So the alternative is to

1. learn to live with, and and enjoy, them (which is what I do) until they disappear when it gets hot or
2. in February before they appear, have a very heavy layer of mulch put down on all your beds.

Then just mow down all that appear in the lawn.

Remember, one way to kill roots - ANY roots - is to keep the leaves pulled/mowed off

Roots must have those leaves to survive.

If you're interested in the noninvasive oxalis varieties (great for shade and winter/spring color), they're available in many area independent nurseries.

Or you can google "Oxalis."

The white oxalis are sold in grocery stores around St. Patrick's Day.

They're great winter perennials for us and can go right into the garden.

These are sometimes called shamrocks and often four-leafed clover leaves will appear.

All oxalis are easy to share. Just dig up the little tubers and transplant.



**Small flowers perfect for a fairy garden: l to r, native nodding clematis, coreopsis, torenia, bat-face cuphea**

Oxalis is a must if you want to plant a "Fairy Garden." I first learned about these when asked to do an article for a magazine. They're quite the rage in some areas. The article below is being reprinted from the version in "THE LAZY GARDENER'S GUIDE ON CD."

#### THE FAIRY GARDEN

One ancient legend goes this way: when Lucifer called for the angels in Heaven to follow him, some did. Others sided with Archangel Michael, electing to stay in Heaven and do good deeds.

A third group of angels announced they weren't interested in doing good or evil deeds. They just wanted to play all day. These angels fell to earth, and became the fairies.

Some ancients believed each plant had its own fairy, who gave it life and vitality, color and beauty. If the fairy was happy, the plant thrived.

It was a common practice to plant a special nook just for the fairies - to help keep them happy! Fairy gardens are still a fun tradition today in many areas.

A fairy garden is a quiet, shady nook, perhaps right on the edge of a sunny, flower-filled bed - spot where fairies can "take a break" during a hot summer afternoon's play. They like the cooling ambiance of ferns, especially the dainty-leafed maidenhair variety and the tiny Korean rockfern.

Fairies are also particularly fond (or so I am told) of clover and oxalis or wood sorrel. Fill the bed with small

flowered varieties that bloom in bright shade, like peacock gingers, snowbells, pansies, torenia, toadflax and violets. The delicate bell-shaped native *Clematis pitcheri*, Johnny jump-ups and 'Moonbeam' coreopsis would do perfectly.

On the sunny edges, it would be fun to have the whimsical bat-face cuphea, tiny daffodils, smallflowered daisies, rainlilies . . . well, you get the idea.

When I think about fairies, or fairy gardens, I feel happy - childhood happy . . . maybe fairies like to have folks thinking about them and good feelings (and healthy, blooming flowers) are their way of saying thanks!

(Above excerpted from THE LAZY GARDENER'S GUIDE ON CD, page 52)



Here's another view of some of my oxalis. This purple mound and two-tone pink oxalis both are over 13 years



old. They both survived the Allison flood which kept them under about 5 feet of water for at least 24 hours.

Both do well in shade but the purple one is also pretty special in morning sun. The leaves looks like a huge mound of purple butterflies.

Actually, tho, I took this picture because I was so excited about my aloe vera flower. My aloe vera is probably decades old (I inherited it from my mother's yard) and this is the first time it has ever bloomed!

It might have done so earlier, if I had ever watered it.

But I never do.

"THE LAZY GARDENER'S GUIDE ON CD" - Specifically for Houston Area gardens - WHAT TO DO EACH MONTH - when to fertilize, prune, plant what where, best plants for sun, shade, butterflies, hummingbirds, etc. Based on Brenda's quirky 40+ year Houston Chronicle Lazy Gardener column. PDF format, print out only the month you need. \$20 total, checks payable to Brenda B. Smith. Mail to: Lazy Gardener's Guide on CD, 14011 Greenranch Dr., Houston, TX 77039-2103.

## WEEKLY EVENTS & ANNOUNCEMENTS CALENDAR

May 4: All-Day Native Plant Day Event at both Cornelius Nursery locations; Gardening with Texas Native Plants Clinic, 10:15 a.m. at both Cornelius Nursery locations, 1200 N. Dairy Ashford and 2233 S. Voss; <http://www.calloways.com/garden-events> Free.

May 4-5: 2013 Water Garden and Pond Tour sponsored by the Houston Pond Society and Lone Star Koi Club. 10 a.m.-5 p.m. both days, members open around 20 private water gardens and ponds of all sizes, with owners on hand to answer questions. \$10 for both days; tickets available at any participating garden. Details at sites [www.houstonpondsociety.org](http://www.houstonpondsociety.org) or [www.lonestarkoi.com](http://www.lonestarkoi.com). Advance tickets available at Nelson Water Gardens, Katy.

May 11: Brazosport Daylily Society will host their annual flower show & plant sale. It will be held at St. Mark's Lutheran Church, 501 Willow Drive, Lake Jackson. The sale & show begin at 1:00pm. Admission: Free

May 11: & 12: Nursery Open 12-5 pm, Peckerwood Garden Foundation Open Days, Guided garden tours at 1:00 & 3:00 pm \$10.00 per person.

[www.peckerwoodgarden.org](http://www.peckerwoodgarden.org), 979-826-3232, 20571 FM 359, Hempstead, TX 77445

May 11: 1 - 4 pm., Hibiscus Show & Plant Sale, Nessler Center, Wings of Heritage Room, 2010 5th Ave. North, Texas City, TX

May 11: 10:15 am. Perennial Gardening Nature's returning friends - Perennials. ... Create garden focal points with perennial plants. Learn how to plan a perennial garden using plants that perform well in our area of Texas year after year. Identify the bloom times of perennials to aid you in planning natural splashes of color in your garden throughout the seasons. This Saturday morning garden clinic is free. Attend this clinic at any Cornelius Nursery (Houston) garden center location.

<http://www.calloways.com/event/perennial-gardening>

May 11: 2 pm. Beginners' Class at Clown Alley Orchids. Topic: "Orchids are Not Hard to Grow" 2:00 P.M.. Tuition \$25 includes a blooming orchid plant. Where: Clown Alley Orchids 3119 Lily Street, Pasadena, TX 77505. Phone: 281-991-6841 Fax: 281-991-3909 Mobile: 832-693-8140. En Espanol: 281-991-1436. ClownAlley@sbcglobal.net. [www.clownalleyorchids.com](http://www.clownalleyorchids.com)

May 13: 6:30 pm. HUG's next meeting will be Monday May 13 at 6:30 PM in the Houston Garden Center in Hermann Park, 5911 Hermann Park Dr. across from Miller Outdoor Theater. One of Houston's most beloved and knowledgeable vegetable growers will talk about "the ton of neat vegetables we can plant now, not to mention the fruits." We'll be selling Bob's book at a reduced price---see sidebar. <http://www.houstonurbangardeners.org/>

May 14: 6:30 pm, Green Thumb Lecture, Precinct 2 Harris County Master Gardener Will Isbell will present a program on "Insects in your Garden", Location: The Meeting Room at Clear Lake Park (on the lakeside), 5001 NASA Parkway, Seabrook, TX 77586. More info: jansidk@aol.com.

May 15: 10 am, Master Gardener Lecture Series, Diana Foss with Texas Parks and Wildlife speaking on Coyotes and Bobcats in our area, FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC, Location: The Meeting Room at Clear Lake Park (on the lakeside), 5001 NASA Parkway, Seabrook, TX 77586. More info: jansidk@aol.com.

May 18: 1-4 pm. The Lone Star Daylily Society will host their 18th Annual Daylily Flower Show and Daylily sale at the Alvin Senior Center, 309 West Sealy, Alvin, Texas. Admission is free.

May 20: 8:30-11:00 am, Open Garden Day. You are invited to tour the working and demonstration gardens maintained by the Harris County Master Gardeners at Precinct 2. Master Gardeners will be on hand to answer your gardening questions. A program on Dividing Bromeliads will be offered from 9:30 - 10:30 am. FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC, CHILDREN WELCOME! Location: Genoa Friendship Garden, 1202 Genoa Red Bluff, Houston, TX 77034. More info: jansidk@aol.com.

May 25: The Houston Area Daylily Society in conjunction with the Houston Hemerocallis Society and Cypress Creek Daylily Club will be hosting their annual Daylily Show and Plant Sale at the Gethsemane Lutheran Church located at 4040 Watonga, Houston, Texas 77092. The Flower Show is from 1:00 -3:00 PM and the plant sale will begin at 10 a.m. until sold out. Admission is free.

June 9: American Hibiscus Society/Lone Star Chapter Show and Sale, 1-4 p.m., Bellaire

Community Center 7008 S. Rice, Bellaire, TX

Recipe for Success has summer internships available. For more information, visit <http://recipe4success.org/get-involved/internships.html>

Submit calendar items to [lazygardenerandfriends@gmail.com](mailto:lazygardenerandfriends@gmail.com). Events must be submitted by the sponsoring organization. Please note: "garden calendar request" in the subject line.

Need speakers for your group? Brenda's "Lazy Gardener's Speakers List" of area horticultural/environmental experts is available free for the asking. Email your request to: [lazygardener@sbcglobal.net](mailto:lazygardener@sbcglobal.net).

## TYPES OF MULCHES

BY JOHN FERGUSON

This week we are going to start looking at the different types of mulches available in Houston and the Gulf Coast.

Our understanding of the importance of biology and organics in soil and plant health has changed and greatly increased in recent years hence a recently revised definition of the word mulch states: "Mulch is anything that will facilitate the improvement of the microorganisms in the soil."



Organic Mulches - Organic mulches offer the most benefits, often at lower cost, and improve the fertility and health of the soil. A three inch layer of organic mulch can lower soil temperature about 25-30°F which reduces plant stress and water requirements. Bare soil can easily reach 100-135°F in the summer which speeds evaporation and dries out the soil, which stresses the plant resulting in wilting, more insect and disease problems and in most plants and eventual death. The higher soil temperature reduces a plants roots ability to absorb moisture (even if it is there) and the higher soil temperature kills beneficial microbes that help feed, water and protect plants roots. In addition soil nitrogen (N) decreases as soil temperatures increase. For every 10°C increase in soil temperature, soil N will decrease 2-3 times. Studies in Austin and San Antonio Texas during the 1990's found that lawns mulched with 1/2 inch of compost each year, save \$50-\$200 per month on their water bill. Two studies from Ohio State University have confirmed that plants grown organically in organically enriched soil suffer far less disease and insect problems than those grown with synthetic chemicals. Hence good organic mulch helps build up the soil, naturally increasing a plants pest and disease resistance. USDA studies on several species have found that mulched plants were often 3 times as large and with 3 times the yield of unmulched plants after several years.



## Bark Mulches

Historically the most common type of organic mulch in the Houston area is bark mulch. Fifty years ago we had millions of cubic yards of bark that had been piled up in East Texas for years slowly rotting (composting) as a waste product of the forest industry. These barks were a dark brown to almost black and all the toxic chemicals had been broken down hence they had some value in gardening. These old composted mulches were used up many years ago. Today only fresh bark is available which has a whole different set of properties and is no longer beneficial to plants. This is why unscrupulous companies add toxic chemicals (ashen mulches) or black dyes (colored) to their bark to make it look old.

Bark mulches are made from the protective outer layer of trees and are produced as a by-product of the lumber and paper industries. Since outer bark is designed as a protective layer for the tree it tends to be low in nutrients. Tree barks frequently contain the chemical suberin, a naturally occurring substance that waterproofs (helps bark shed water) and prevents the bark from being broken down by soil microorganisms. In addition to suberin, barks contain waxes that also help waterproof the tree. Hence, the suberin in the bark can slow or retard the growth of some plant species. It also repels rain preventing it from being absorbed into the soil. Additionally, barks contain very little energy-releasing compounds used by the soil microorganisms that are extremely important to soil and plant health.

Barks can be broken into two basic types, hardwoods and softwoods (conifers). In much of the country, hardwood bark is mostly from oak trees and softwood bark is from pine trees or other conifers. They are both a by-product of the lumber and paper industry. Since conifers tend to be a pioneer species (they grow on poor nutrient deficient soils) so they contain very little nutrients (less than hardwood bark). Barks have a very high C:N ratio that averages 450:1. Hence they require a lot of nitrogen to break down often starving nearby plants in the process.

Large pieces of bark are slower to breakdown and less likely to blow and wash away than finely ground pieces, but they are considered more difficult to work around. Barks and uncomposted sawdust from redwood, cedar, Douglas fir, larch, eucalyptus, and spruce trees, are considered toxic to many plants. Any bark that is high in tannic acids and phenols is potentially harmful unless thoroughly composted and leached.

Fine ground pine bark packs down and prevents oxygen from reaching the soil. It is difficult to wet, sheds rain after it dries out, and prevents moisture from reaching the plants roots. Often, when trees are dying from disease they are cut for pulp or lumber and the diseased bark ends up being sold to consumers.

Research at Cornell University has shown that conifer barks release toxic volatile compounds that are harmful to plants like tomatoes. Research at the University of Arkansas has found that Marigold growth was significantly reduced in beds mulched with pine bark [HortTechnology, July-September 1997]. Many tree biologists, anatomists, arborists, soil ecologists and other experts now recommend that bark based mulches be avoided. Dr. Alex Shigo at the University of Georgia, a leading tree expert has several papers posted on the Internet about this subject. Research at the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center has also found that pine bark does not support many of the beneficial microorganisms that prevent disease.

The natural chemicals in pine bark tend to kill off many species of beneficial microbes that naturally attack and prey on fire ants and termites; hence problems with these insects are reported to be more common when pine bark is used. A report presented at the Texas Association of Apple Growers convention found that bark mulches actually steal nutrients away from plants when compared with mulches made from recycled tree trimmings and brush that release nutrients and feed the soil (i.e. Native mulches).

In recent years as fuel prices have increased more and more, in many areas of the country barks are being burned for fuel resulting in reduced availability for the nursery industry.

## FEATURED PLANT OF THE WEEK

BY HEIDI SHEESLEY

OF TREESearch FARMS

Scarlet bouvardia

*Bouvardia ternifolia*

Blooming from

May to November,



this lovely Texas native is known for its use as a cut flower.

Dead head regularly to keep it dense and neat.  
2' x 2'.

Root hardy in a normal winter.

Good drainage-  
partial sun to full sun.  
Hummingbirds!



Photo courtesy of Treesearch Farms. Local nurseries that carry plants from Treesearch:

Buchanan's Native Plants  
611 E. 11th St.  
Houston TX 77008  
(713) 861-5702

The Arbor Gate  
15635 FM 2920  
Tomball TX 77377  
(281) 351-8851

Joshua's Native Plants  
502 West 18th Street  
Houston TX 77008  
(713) 862-7444

Nelson's Water Gardens  
1502 Katy Fort Bend Rd.  
Katy TX 77493  
(281) 391-4769



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