

June 21, 2013

Dear Friends,

Here is the 15th 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 supporting cast of contributing writers and technical specialists who will chime in and tweak away regularly. We would love to keep receiving your input on this newsletter comments suggestions questions Email your thoughts to: lazygardenerandfriends@gmail.com. Thanks so much for your interest.

Please.

Enjoy!

SPITTING FIG TREES? . . . PLANTING TO DISCOURAGE BURGLARS



CAPTION: My fig tree attracts butterflies (center insert), but it's never spit on me. Now we're watching for walking sticks, right insert.

BY BRENDA BEUST SMITH

Lord, I love this job! Just when it seems as if every possible question imaginable has been asked, along comes a super treat.

Like when Gretchen Axelson emailed:

"...our young golden fig trees in pots began to squirt liquid from their stem ... intermittent squirts from two of the trees. It looked a little like when someone "gleeks" from under their tongue. Have you seen or heard of this phenomenon?"

Nope, never have. Couldn't find anything on the 'net either. Quizzed local experts and most are now scratching their heads.

KTRH GardenLine's Randy Lemmon & Angela Chandler came the closest. Randy guessed some kind of insect, maybe?

Angela took it ever further:

"Seems like Mama Fig was a bit short on the good manners training! I would almost bet that if (Gretchen) looks closer, she will see that it is not coming from the stems itself, but from a Walking Stick insect. They are busy mating right now, and I am finding them everywhere. They are annoying the daylights out of the bees because they like to get under the hive cover.

They "spit" as a defense mechanism. In fact, one of their common names is Spit Devil. They are pretty good at camouflage, so maybe they are on the stems and it just LOOKS like it is coming from the fig itself?"

Now, tell me true, who else would tell you these things?

Before we move on, let me plug Angela's <u>The Garden Academy</u> webpage. She's one of my treasured expert resources.

Her webpage is jam-packed with Greater Houston area gardening advice that could only come from someone who knows our subtropical growing climate as well as Angela does.

(LINK FOR "THE GARDEN ACADEMY) https://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Garden-Academy/118766921485456?ref=tn_tnmn)

BURGLAR-PROOFING PLANTING

The Mayor's recent newsletter (free to all) featured interesting tips on discouraging burglars from breaking into your home

But - while not meaning to cast animadversions - it completely overlooked the role our landscaping plays in often being the first step in inviting or turning-off such invaders.

Go stand in - or, better yet - drive down your street.

Pretend you're looking for a house to break into. Zero in on your house.

Could your large shrubs hide someone hoping to break into your house or car?

Walk around both sides of the house. Are there vines or shrubbery that would make good places for burglars to hide or stash their loot for later pickup?

Some more tips:

- * Could shrubs in front of first-floor windows camouflage a flashlight as a thief moves around inside?
- * Consider low-pruned but thorny shrubs under first floor windows: agaves, barberry, cactuses, coral bean, holly, natal plum, parsley hawthorn, sago palms or shrub roses. Mahonias work well in shady areas.







Pretty plants with thorns (to discourage break-ins): shrub roses, natal plums and (in shade) mahonia.

(If you go this route, have other, predesignated exit routes in case of fire. Or keep handy thick canvas cloths to

throw over the plants!)

- * How about second-story windows? Will large tree branches give easy access? Trim away from windows.
- * Noise and light are a burglar's worst enemies (next to a barking dog, of course). Hang wind chimes along areas where someone might sneak in.
- * Most nurseries also carry motion-triggered items that emit noises when someone comes too close or motion-triggered sprinklers that send out strong streams of water toward the motion. (Also great for discouraging dogs and cats from invading a garden.)
- * Make sure outside lighting doesn't create dark corners where someone can hide.
- * Don't place flagstones, river rocks or accent pieces where a burglar might use them to break a window.
- * On the other hand, large gravel on the ground near windows will make a noise when someone walks on it.
- * Consider planting thorny plants like vicious roses, bougainvillea or pyracantha along the back fence.
- * Be sure shrubbery never covers fire hydrants or outdoor faucets. In case of fire, these need to be easily accessible.
- * And be sure house numbers are easily visible from the street.

Don't want to get rid of huge-but-opaque shrubs - but don't want them to be so friendly to burglars?

Consider underpruning them. That is, turn them into small trees so anyone hiding behind them can easily be seen? Covered this in a recent LG&F newsletter column on pruning:

Any other suggestions you would add?

COMING NEXT WEEK: KNOW OUR GARDEN SNAKES!

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Now that the temperatures are rising, it's important for you, and even more for your children, to recognize our local native snakes that might seek a cool moist respite in your gardens.

Next week we'll introduce you to some.

In the meantime, here's one (above) that's a gardener's good friend: the perfectly harmless little garter snake. He's helping to rid your yard of rats, mice, termites and ants.

As an aside, that white flower (which doesn't particularly attract snakes, he was just trying to escape my camera) should be in ever lazy gardener's garden: giant white spider lily (Hymenocallis).

Giant white spider lilies are VERY hard to find in nurseries, but will be available at two big upcoming sales, one tomorrow, which is why I'm mentioning this in this column:

June 22: Great Bulbs for Houston Area sale, 10am-2pm, Bayou City Heirloom Bulbs, 5842 Velma Lane, Humble, TX (just off Lee Road north of Beltway 8). Bring your own wagon.

July 27: Summer Color Conference and Plant Sale. The 8am-3pm workshop at Mercer Arboretum & Botanic Gardens in North Harris County. The workshop will feature Celia Dow on Gingers, Norm Arnold on Garden Creativity and Margaret Cherry on Summer Color. The \$80 fee includes handouts, lunch and early access to the plant sale. Register at 281-443-8731 or www.hcp4.net/mercer

ARCHIVES OF BRENDA'S COLUMNS

(Link to archives: http://archive.constantcontact.com/fs172/1112503958110/archive/1112822112421.html

"THE LAZY GARDENER'S GUIDE ON CD" - Specifically for Houston Area gardens - WHAT TO DO EACH MONTH - when to fertilize, prune, plantwhat 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, 14011Greenranch Dr., Houston, TX 77039-2103.

For correspondence that is specific to Brenda, feel free to email her directly at lazygardener@sbcglobal.net.

WEEKLY EVENTS & ANNOUNCEMENTS CALENDAR

June 22: 2 p.m., Beginners' Class at Clown Alley Orchids, Class: "Orchids are Not Hard to Grow", Tuition \$25 includes a blooming orchid plant. Where: Clown Alley Orchids, 3119 Lily Street, Pasadena, TX 77505 Phone: 281-991-6841, En Espanol: www.clownalleyorchids.com.

June 23: 1:30-3:30 p.m. Drip Irrigation Lecture by Clare LaGrue at Wabash Antiques & Feed Store. What is drip irrigation? And why do you need it? How important is it? Learn how to conserve water by setting up drip irrigation in your garden, beds and containers to save on water bills. This will be a hands-on class and questions are welcomed. www.wabashfeed.com, 713-863-8322.

June 25: 4 - 7 p.m., OHBA Summer Plant Series. Location: United Way, 50 Waugh Dr Houston, TX 77007. Speaker 1: Chris Wiesinger, President and Owner of The Southern Bulb Co. Topic: The Bulb Hunter: A Photographic Journey. Through a beautiful photographic journey Chris will describe his efforts to find rare bulbs and how best to use them in your landscapes to create magnificent beauty. Speaker 2: Mike Alexander, Danny Yarbrough & Casey Sherwood of New Nurseries. Topic: New & Underutilized Plant Varieties for Houston. Register today at: http://summerplantseries.eventbrite.com/.

June 26: 7:30 p.m. Program: "Star Cactus (Astrophytum asterias). A bedroom for bees and a cupboard for conies" presented by Anna Strong. Houston Garden Center, 1500 Hermann Drive www.hcsstex.org. June 29: 10:15 a.m. Plants that Love Texas Heat Free Clinic, at both Cornelius Nursery locations, 1200 N. Dairy Ashford and 2233 S. Voss; http://www.calloways.com/clinics.

July 1: Open Garden Day. The Harris County Master Gardeners at Precinct 2 will be hosting Open Garden Days twice monthly during the summer months on the 1st & 3rd Mondays. Hours are from 8:30 am - 11:00 am. Master Gardeners on hand to answer questions & present programs from 9:30 a.m. - 10:30 a.m. Herbs & more available for sale in the Greenhouse. Children's Program: Cylinder Gardening/Propagation. Adult Program: Home Irrigation. Location: Genoa Friendship Garden, 1202 Genoa Red Bluff, Houston, TX 77034. http://hcmga.tamu.edu

July 6th: Jerrys Jungle will be open to the public July 6th, Saturday,9 to 5, for visitors to stroll the gardens and enjoy the vast array of new plants. Plants that were not available in April, are now. 712 Hill Rd, 77037, for info see jerrysjungle.com or call 832-978-5358.

July 6: 10:15 a.m. Growing Fall Tomatoes Clinic at both Cornelius Nursery locations, 1200 N. Dairy Ashford and 2233 S. Voss: http://www.calloways.com/clinics. Free.

July 12: 11a.m. Brazoria County Master Gardeners, Texas AgriLife Extension Office, 21017 County Road 171, Angleton, spearker: John Ferguson, topic: composting (back yard and small scale), for more information contact Dana Morisse-Arnold (979) 864-7713.

July 15: The Harris County Master Gardeners at Precinct 2 Open Garden Day. 8:30 am - 11:00 am. Master Gardeners on hand to answer questions and present programs from 9:30 am - 10:30 am. Herbs and more available for sale in the Greenhouse. Programs on Herbs offered for children & adults. Where: Genoa Friendship Garden, 1202 Genoa Red Bluff, Houston, TX 77034. http://hcmga.tamu.edu

July 17: 10 a.m. Master Gardener Lecture Series. On Wednesday, July 17, John Ferguson will be speaking on how the environment can effect our health. John is the Founder and Owner of Nature's Way Resources. He holds an MS degree in Physics and Geology and is a licensed Soil Scientist in Texas. FREE. Where: The Meeting Room at Clear Lake Park (on the lakeside), 5001 NASA Parkway, Seabrook, TX 77586, http://hcmga.tamu.edu, 281 855 5600

July 20th: 9:30 a.m. - 3:00 p.m. The Plumeria Society of America Plant Sale. There will be a Gorgeous Bloom display of the flowers available, an 'Ask the Experts' table plus door prizes throughout the day. Arrive early for best selection. For more information: www.theplumeriasociety.org. Location: Fort Bend County Fairgrounds 3350 Hwy 36S--Rosenberg, TX.

July 27: 8 a.m. - 3 p.m. Annual Summer Color Conference and Plant Sale. Splash into summer with this one-day immersion into perfect solutions for creating a glorious garden that thrives in Houston's summer heat! Reservations required. Speakers: Ceil Dow, avid enthusiast and ginger expert will speak on the gingers she

loves, Chuck Bybee from JJL Greenhouses (a wholesale nursery) will present Bedding Plants and Annuals that are good for Houston summers and Norm Arnold of Glorious Gardens will present Landscape Designs that bring out color. Visit http://themercersociety.org/events-programs-2/summer-color-symposium/ for more information. Fee.

August 17: The Texas Master Naturalist Fall 2013 Training Session begins on August 17, 2013, and runs through October 30, 2013. Classes are on Tuesday evenings and field trips are on Saturdays. For more details, email training.officer@txgcmn.org, or you can visit the website of local chapters:

- Heartwood (Conroe area)
- Coastal Prairie (Rosenberg)
- Cradle of Texas (Brazoria County): training to start early 2014
- Galveston Bay Area: training to start Spring 2014
- Gulf Coast (Houston)
- Mid Coast (Matagorda County & south):

Submit calendar items to 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.

MULCH CORNER WOOD CHIP MULCHES (SINGLE SPECIES) BY JOHN FERGUSON



Last week we talked about using compost as a mulch since we had some questions on the subject. This time we are going to continue our discussion on some of the other types of organic mulches a gardener may want to use.

Sometimes recyclers will grind up one single species of tree into chips that can be used as mulch. Research has shown that these types of mulches may retard the growth of some species of plants. As mulch decomposes it releases chemicals that affect plant growth, good or bad.

Cypress - Cypress mulch became popular during the first part of this century for two reasons; it is very rot resistant and would last for years (just the opposite of what plants require for good health) and the heartwood

of a mature tree is pink (our first colored mulch). It takes decades for a cypress tree to mature enough to get the colored heartwood hence it is not sustainable. Mulch producers dredged up old cypress trees from the bayous around New Orleans to make mulch out of them and this significantly added to the flooding after the hurricane as the storm surge could move in much easier without the trees blocking the flow. The old cypress trees have been used up and we get plantation grown trees now. These young trees do not have the colored heartwood and have a very high C:N ratio of close to 500:1 which causes nutrient tie-up problems. Studies have shown that Cypress mulch slows the growth or a range of woody plants such as hydrangea, spirea, viburnum and compared to plain to pine bark which is a low quality mulch.

Eucalyptus - Eucalyptus mulch most commonly is made from Eucalyptus grandis and has been found to be phytotoxic to the germination of a range of seedlings. It is plantation grown which reduces native habitat for wildlife, it is slow to breakdown, has a very high C:N ratio, does not support a wide range of beneficial microbes required for good soil health and generally bad for plants in hot moist humid areas like the gulf coast.

Black Walnut - This mulch (Juglans nigra) inhibits the growth and even kills some plants. It contains the toxic chemical jugalone which is a known herbicide.

The Tree of Heaven - This tree (Ailanthus altissima) has been found to contain the allopathic chemical Ailanthone which is known and used as a herbicide.

Straw - "Straw" is the dried stalks of grains (which are actually types of grasses) after the seed heads have been harvested. Straw often has a shiny pale gold color and is a good mulch for many purposes. As it breaks down it encourages a good balance of beneficial bacteria and fungus that many of our common vegetables require. It is generally applied 4-5" deep in ornamental beds and 8-10" in vegetable beds. It protects soil, improves soil as it breaks down, offers good winter protection. Researchers have found that Colorado potato beetles had a much more difficult time finding potatoes plants mulched with straw as compared to un-mulched plants (other research has shown significantly less eggs and larva also). The whitish reflective nature is also beneficial. It is reported to protect tomatoes against soil dwelling diseases.

Hay - "Hay", which is used to feed animals, is a mixture of grasses (and sometimes clover), that is cut dried and baled with the seed heads intact (includes any weeds present). Hay is often a dull brownish-green color. Hay can be used as a mulch but the seeds in it often germinate becoming weeds. Apply 3-4" deep in ornamental beds and 5-6" in vegetable beds. It will protect the soil and improves soil as it breaks down, and is good for winter protection. Many hay fields are now sprayed with a herbicide called picloram which is sold under the brand names Grazon and Tordon. This herbicide is used to kill broadleaf weeds and persists in the environment on the hay. It is reported that if hay has been treated with herbicide is later applied as mulch, the treated hay will still kill many plants (even trees) years after application. To test the hay to see if it is safe to use as mulch, place some in at least a 1 gallon bucket and soak in water for a few hours. Next pour the liquid on any broad leafed plant and see if they become stressed or die. Peanuts and beans are very sensitive hence make good indicator plants. When contaminated hay is used on plants they will have more insect and disease problems even if they are not killed outright.

Newspapers (and other paper products) - they work best if shredded first and apply 4-6" thick. It is generally free and can protect plants from frosts. Research at the University of Vermont has found a 6" layer of shredded newspaper exceptionally good at suppressing weeds for up to nearly 2 years. Best used as a special purpose mulch. Note: Avoid colored paper as some inks may still contain toxins and heavy metals. Most colored inks used on newspapers are now safe and biodegradable however unless you know for sure it's better to be safe.

As part of the recycling effort, pelletized newspaper is available in some areas and should be a fair quality mulch if not contaminated. Sometimes available in different colors and with fertilizer added. Often recycled paper mulches contain toxic forms of aluminum that leaches into the soil and prevents plants from absorbing phosphorus hence greatly reducing the plants growth. This problem becomes worse on acid soils. Repeated use often leads to aluminum toxicity in the soil.

"Kraft Paper", the kind of brown paper that grocery bags are made from and cardboard are more effective at preventing weeds than newspaper. Two sheets thickness of Kraft paper or 1 layer of cardboard will work well. A twp year study at Ohio State University has found that 6-8" shredded newspaper increased yields of sweet corn, soy beans, and tomatoes over bare ground (unmulched) or 6-8" of straw. A University of Missouri study found that raspberries mulched with shredded newspaper out performed those with black plastic mulch or those without any mulch.

A group of market gardeners found that Kraft paper brushed with used cooking oil warmed the soil by 6°F while black plastic only raised soil temperature 3°F. Also in a few weeks the warming effect of the coated Kraft paper went away preventing the soil from getting too hot. The Agricultural Research Service has found that brown Kraft paper coated with soybean or linseed oil, has all the advantages of plastic mulch but costs less and degrades harmlessly in a few months with no mess to clean up.

Kraft Paper - Medium quality mulch used 1-2 layers thick. Easy and quick to apply, combines some of the benefits of plastic with those of organic mulches, made from recycled material, breaks down easily. It can be applied by mechanized equipment which is useful for large applications. It is expensive as compared to other mulches. Air and water does not penetrate as well as loose mulch but better much better than plastic, as with plastic the edges need to be secured. It tends to break down in less than 1 season allowing weeds to grow through. Some light will penetrate allowing some weed seeds to germinate as compared to other mulches. The weeds can generate enough force to tear the paper away from the soil within a few weeks of planting (Journal of Sustainable Agriculture, V13,#2). This is relatively new to market, only lasts one season at best, limited research published at this time. One study indicates that Kraft paper is more effective in short season areas compared to hot weather areas with high rainfall. Kraft paper is becoming available in various colors like black (allows warming of soil for earlier crops like black plastic but is biodegradable.

GARDENING Q&A

WITH MARK BOWEN



Chinch Bug season is here and the questions have been pouring in regarding what to do about them.

So what is the big deal. The big deal is that chinch bugs are one of the few maladies that can easily kill your St. Augustine lawn. The tell tale sign is dry crispy lawn areas with somewhat damaged areas surrounding them that have intermittent grass blades that look like they have iron chlorosis (search an image for iron chlorosis in grass if needed on the internet) on cloudy days. This is an occurrence I noticed on a widespread basis over many years of managing properties organically, but I have never seen it written about in books. To be sure you have them, you can water and then get down on your knees and look for them crawling around. You can search an image for them on the internet to make sure what you are looking at, but be careful not to confuse them with the Big-Eyed Bug, which looks somewhat similar and is a chinch bug predator.

Keep in mind that chinch bugs like hot, dry conditions and soils with a very low organic matter content. One of the best things we can do to manage pest is to provide them with conditions that are about the opposite of what they prefer. To start with, make sure you lawn gets about an inch of water per week. Water as deeply and infrequently as possible. If you water shallow and often, your grass will be shallow rooted and very susceptible to chinch bug damage since your grass will be very stress prone. Conversely, if you let your soil get bone dry before watering again, your grass will get very stressed out, the dry conditions will be just right for chinch bugs, and you may end up with a raging problem. Pay particularly close attention to grass areas near concrete driveways, street and sidewalks. Such areas dry out more quickly, and chinch bugs normally get started in those types of spots.

In addition to watering properly, you can minimize the chances of having a chinch bug problem by cutting your grass high (at least 3.5-4 inches high) and recycling your clippings. By cutting your grass high, you will shade the soil more and stress the grass less. Both of these results make your grass less susceptible to chinch bugs. Applying a one half inch topdressing of compost in spring or fall also improves the organic matter content of your soil, making it much less attractive to chinch bugs which favor low organic matter content soils. Also, avoid using chemical fungicides at all times. These fungicides kill beneficial microbes that often keep chinch bugs populations in check.

If you end up with a chinch bug problem, make sure you are getting the 1" of water per week, spray the damaged areas weekly with Orange Oil at 2 ounces per gallon until the damaged areas stop spreading. Be sure to treat the day after you water so that the grass is not stressed any more than necessary by the orange oil. The orange oil will make the grass look worse before it ends up looking better after the chinch bugs are under control.

Have a great summer!

Yours in gardening,

Mark Bowen

GOT GARDENING QUESTIONS?

Be sure to check out our gardening blog at <u>www.lazygardenerandfriends.com</u> to get your gardening questions answered and to interact with other gardeners.

IN THE NEWS:

Bayou Planting Guide helps your garden grow: Five foolpoof plants that thrive in the Houston climate http://houston.culturemap.com

Launch of U.S. Food Waste Challenge - http://www.usda.gov/oce/foodwaste/index.htm

ABOUT US

BRENDA BEUST SMITH

WE KNOW HER BEST AS THE LAZY GARDENER

- ... but Brenda Beust Smith is also:
 - * a national award-winning writer & editor
 - * a nationally-published writer & photographer
 - * a national horticultural speaker
 - * a former Houston Chronicle reporter

When the Chronicle discontinued Brenda's 45-year-old Lazy Gardener" print column a couple of years ago, it ranked as the longest-running, continuously-published local newspaper column in the Greater Houston area.

Brenda's gradual sideways step from Chronicle reporter into gardening writing led first to an 18-year series of when-to-do-what Lazy Gardener Calendars, then to her *Lazy Gardener's Guide* book and now to her *Lazy Gardener's Guide* on CD (which retails for \$20. However, \$5 of every sale is returned to the sponsoring group at her speaking engagements).

A Harris County Master Gardener, Brenda has served on the boards of many Greater Houston area horticulture organizations and has hosted local radio and TV shows, most notably a 10+-year Lazy Gardener run on HoustonPBS (Ch. 8) and her call-in "EcoGardening" show on KPFT-FM.

In addition to her position as Production Editor on the Garden Club of America's magazine and her freelance writing career, Brenda's latest venture is "THE LAZY GARDENER'S & FRIENDS HOUSTON GARDEN NEWSLETTER" with John Ferguson and Mark Bowen of Nature's Way Resources.

A native of New Orleans and graduate of St. Agnes Academy and the University of Houston, Brenda lives in Aldine and is married to the now retired Aldine High School Coach Bill Smith. They have one son, Blake.

John Ferguson

John is a native Houstonian and has over 27 years of business experience. He owns Nature's Way Resources, a composting company that specializes in high quality compost, mulch, and soil mixes. He holds a MS degree in Physics and Geology and is a licensed Soil Scientist in Texas. John has won many awards in horticulture and environmental issues. He represents the composting industry on the Houston-Galveston Area Council for solid waste. His personal garden has been featured in several horticultural books and "Better Homes and Gardens" magazine. His business has been recognized in the Wall Street Journal for the quality and value of their products. He is a member of the Physics Honor Society and many other professional societies. John is is the co-author of the book *Organic Management for the Professional*.

Mark Bowen

Mark is a native Houstonian, a horticulturist and organic specialist with a background in garden design, habitat

restoration and organic project management. He is currently the general manager of Nature's Way Resources. Mark is also the co-author of the book *Habitat Gardening for Houston and Southeast Texas*, the author of the book *Naturalistic Landscaping for the Gulf Coast*, co-author of the *Bayou Planting Guide* and contributing landscape designer for the book *Landscaping Homes: Texas*.

Pablo Hernandez

Pablo Hernandez is the special projects coordinator for Nature's Way Resources. His realm of responsibilities include: serving as a webmaster, IT support, technical problem solving/troubleshooting, metrics management and quality control. Pablo helps this newsletter happen from a technical support standpoint.







http://www.arborgate.com/

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Save 20%: Redeem this coupon for a big discount on Nature's Way Resources Native Aged Double Ground Mulch(http://natureswayresources.com/products.htm). Please note: this offer is for bulk material (by the cubic yard) purchases by retail customers only at Nature's Way Resources, located at 101 Sherbrook Circle, Conroe TX.

Offer Expires: 7/1/13

