



November 16, 2013

Dear Friends,

Here is the 36th 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](mailto:lazygardenerandfriends@gmail.com). Thanks so much for your interest.

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Enjoy!

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**ARE YOU CREATING BUSY WORK IN THE GARDEN? - CAN'T EAT IT? PLANT IT! - MEA CULPA, MERCER!**

**by BRENDA BEUST SMITH**



Pretty little garden, isn't this?

But what I really see is a gardener who doesn't mind creating a lot of unnecessary busy work.

How many "Lazy Gardening No-No!" examples can you spot?

I count five.

1. No border. That grass isn't crazy. It's going to grow right into that garden where, one must assume, the gardener has put in really good fertile soil or at least is fertilizing and watering regularly.

2. Plant choice. There's nothing wrong with tulips and hyacinths. They are gorgeous. But . . .

a. both must be refrigerated at least four to six weeks before planting in a Texas Gulf Coast garden. Some nurseries sell "pre-chilled" bulbs. But if it doesn't say that, you must do it\* or all you'll get will be short green stalks and no flowers.

b. these are spring blooming annual bulbs in this area. That means almost this entire garden is going to have to be replaced as soon as these blooms die. They won't return to bloom again.

3. I saw this garden and I know that mulch is very fine and the soil is quite visible through it. That means weeds will pop up easily. A layer of newspaper under the mulch, right on top the soil around the plant will help stop weeds from sprouting.

4. Plants are flush against the tree. This may trigger tree problems in the future. Always leave an open "collar" around the tree. Lots of vital microbacterial action takes place at the point where bark touches soil. Good air circulation is vital.

5. Might or might not be a problem. Again, I know this garden is on flat ground. If it were on a slope or in an extremely well drained area, this wouldn't be a problem. But most of Houston is flat. Soil under ground-level gardens often stays way too wet during our spring and fall rains.

Local gardeners would have been well advised to raise this bed, which would have been easier to do if some type of border material had been used around the edge.

On the other hand, raising the garden would have posed a problem for the tree. That "collar" mentioned earlier really should be at least a foot wide at this point.

But, in truth, it's not really that big a problem.

As that tree grows, its trunk is going to widen and probably the roots it sends out will kill all those plants anyway!

\* Tulips, hyacinths, muscari and crocus are Holland bulbs that require cold for the bulbs to fully develop and trigger blooms. Put the bulbs in a paper sack and set in the refrigerator for 4-6 weeks before planting. New Year's Day is a traditional day for planting these, so hurry.

If you're a couple of weeks late, it probably won't matter. Remember, these bulbs NEED cold winter soil.

If you want to pot tulips, place one row of tulip bulbs with flat sides facing outward. That way, the leaves will form a nice outer "wreath of green." Set the pot outside in the garage on the concrete floor. Cover with a cardboard box. When you see green shoots, take the box off.



## CAN'T EAT IT? PLANT IT!

As regular readers know, I love gardeners who march to their own drummers. So often they open our eyes to so many new options.



Heard recently from a Klein gardener who definitely qualifies as an "own drummer." When she discovered some too-old-to-eat sweet potatoes, rather than throw them out, she planted them. That was just the beginning. From that one semi-rotted sweet potato she harvest about 13 lbs.

This year when she wound up with some past-their-prime red and white potatoes, she planted those. She feels safest, she says, starting with potatoes from her local grocery store, since she feels sure they're safe to eat.

That's not to say our nurseries don't carry perfectly edible potato starts. But, it does save on gas - just making one trip for your kitchen and garden both!

Thrilled by her success, this Klein gardener has branched out into planting other not-so-fresh-looking veggies into the ground:

*"The top slice of a yellow onion was growing sprouts, some green onions were too slimy. Into the ground they went. They grew with no baby-ing. The red potatoes and brown potatoes either rotted or just grew tiny babies, not worth doing them again."*

Not all her plants are inground. Multiple past-prime-time sweet potatoes in a 12-inch pot did great too. She noted these grew in funny shapes (pictured above) that she really enjoyed.

She has better luck, she says, with a mixture of peat moss and sand than she does with expensive store-bought potting soil.

I'M SO SORRY, MERCER!



My cyber-challenged photographic abilities resulted in sub-par pictures last week of the [beautiful flowers in bloom at Mercer Arboretum & Botanic Garden and the captions](#) were even less clear. So I'm going to run them again this week. Mercer is such a treasure for us, a living library, I don't want to pass up another opportunity to encourage everyone to visit . . . especially in this cooler weather which is so great for walking!



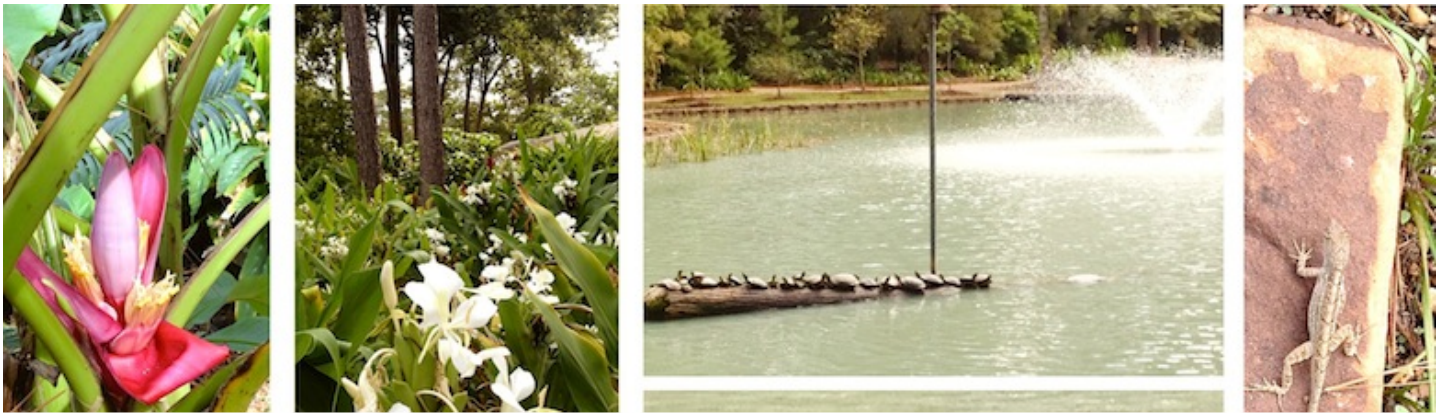
Blooming at Mercer in early November were these usual spring beauties: l to r, bluebonnets (in a tall rock "container" for excellent drainage) and camellias by Storey Lake. Azaleas, of course, now bloom spring and fall but it's still awesome to see them on the Azalea Trail. Right above, fall-blooming Japanese anemone 'Alice Staub', named for one of Houston's best known horticulturists. So glad Alice came into my life.



Your fall garden, too, should now be a'glow with natives vital to butterflies, hummingbirds and other birds, especially migrating species: l to r, American beautyberry, cassia, purple coneflowers, *Spathoglottis* x 'Groovy Grape.'



I found some real exciting surprises at Mercer. For example, I'd never seen a white Philippine violet (barlaria) or, a yellow cape honeysuckle. This barlaria has been evergreen through recent winters. And certainly have never seen such lush plantings of the shade-loving purple Persian Shield and the exotic toadlilies



Take the kiddos along when you go. Not only is the walk a healthy-but-easily manageable one, they'll be as delighted as you are when they get to I to r, see flowering banana trees, smell the incredible fragrant butterfly gingers, and delight in fun wildlife like turtles and lizards.





Delights of our walk ranged from beautiful orange and red/white Mexican zinnias and spectacular *Celosia spicata* spikes.



I'm dying for a gigantic crinum (left). Always an eye-catcher is this fantastic bromeliad, *Aechmea blanchetiana*, along with multiple shade-lovers including yellow ligularia and red firespike, which did my heart good. Mercer's aren't blooming any better this year than mine are!

\* \* \*

NEED WHEN TO DO WHAT GARDENING HELP IN THE GREATER HOUSTON AREA? Brenda's "Lazy Gardener's Guide on CD" gives month-by-month reminders of when to to plant what, fertilize, prune, etc. \$20. Make checks payable to Brenda Beust Smith and mail to "Lazy Gardener's Guide on CD," 14011 Greenranch Dr., Houston, TX 77039. PDF file.

\* \* \*

Need a gardening/environmental speaker for your group or school program? Brenda has list of dozens of great horticulture/ecology Upper Texas Gulf Coast area speakers, many of whom are free. Email her for a free copy or for criteria to have your name added as a speaker: [lazygardener@sbcglobal.net](mailto:lazygardener@sbcglobal.net).

Questions aimed at me can be emailed to [lazygardener@sbcglobal.net](mailto:lazygardener@sbcglobal.net) (altho I'll get any you send to this newsletter as well).

ARCHIVES OF BRENDA'S COLUMNS:

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

For correspondence that is specific to Brenda, feel free to email her directly at [lazygardener@sbcglobal.net](mailto:lazygardener@sbcglobal.net).

## **JOHN'S CORNER**

## **SOIL AMMENDMENTS**

## **GYPSUM**

Recently we have had a few people asking about gypsum to improve their soils. Gypsum can be a useful soil

amendment under certain conditions when used properly. It is not a cure-all as some will have you to believe but another tool in the toolbox to have a beautiful garden.

So, what is gypsum? Gypsum is a common naturally occurring mineral that is made up of the elements calcium, oxygen, and sulfur with some water molecules mixed in. Chemically it is known as calcium sulfate and water ( $\text{CaSO}_4 + 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$ ). Gypsum has 23% calcium and 18% sulfur and its solubility is 150 times that of limestone, hence it is a natural source of plant nutrients.

Gypsum naturally occurs in sedimentary deposits from ancient sea beds. Gypsum is mined and made into many products like drywall used in construction, agriculture and industry. Gypsum deposits are found at various locations around the world. In North America there are gypsum deposits from Canada to Texas and in many Western States.

Mined gypsum is primarily calcium sulfate hydrated with water molecules in its chemical structure and may contain small amounts of sand or clay particles and a few trace elements. The trace elements may be boron or iron to arsenic and lead and varies with each deposit. Many deposits in Canada have arsenic while those in Texas may have very little. Primarily mined gypsum is very safe to use and a great amendment for many soils. Gypsum is a good way to add calcium and sulfur to ones soils as it does not change the pH (acidity or alkalinity) of soils. Many soils along the Gulf coast are deficient in calcium. This deficiency can lead to problems in our gardens like blossom end rot on tomatoes. Beneficial fungus in the soil that break down organic matter and prevent many soil diseases require plenty of calcium. Plants and microbes build amino acids and proteins and they require sulfur in their chemical structure so gypsum may help in this area also.

Gypsum can also be used to remove salts such as sodium chloride ( $\text{NaCl}$ ) that cause many of our clay rich soils to easily erode (dispersive soils) due to the sodium in them. Calcium has two positive electrical charges while sodium only has one, hence calcium has twice the attraction than sodium. This allow calcium to replace sodium on clay particles and humus and allow the sodium to be dissolved in water and removed (leached) from the soil. However, there are other concerns with the use of gypsum if too much is used or if the soil does not require it. If gypsum is applied where it is not needed then it may cause a deficiency of magnesium (Mg) caused by replacement by calcium (Ca), excessive sulfur (S) in the plants, decreased phosphorous (P) availability if used excessively, increased levels of aluminum (Al) in ground or surface waters due to leaching from the soil, and contamination from impurities within the gypsum, such as boron (B) or heavy metals. Hence gypsum should only be applied if a soil chemical analysis indicates that it is needed.

My favorite soil chemistry testing lab is the Texas Plant and Soil Lab as they specializes in organic production techniques and they give the results in two different ways. First they will use a conventional strong acid test which indicates the total nutrients in the soil even though they may not be available to plants (chemically locked up). This is similar to one's money in a savings account.

Secondly they give a very weak acid test that mimics the acidity of rain and groundwater which is what the plant root actually sees and can use. This is similar to a person's checking account where the money is easily accessible. Texas Plant and Soil Lab, 5115 W. Monte Christo, (956) 383-0739, Edinburg, TX 78539, <http://www.texasplantandsoillab.com/>

For a more complete and technical discussion of gypsum please see the Nature's Way Resource website: <http://www.natureswayresources.com/resource/infosheets/gypsum.html>

## IN THE NEWS

**Coastal Prairie Partnership Grant. Coastal Prairie Partnership is offering a small (\$250) grant to assist**



a school/teacher in furthering pollinator education at their school. If you know of a school or teacher who might be a good fit for this grant, please pass the information on. The grant deadline is December 1, 2013. Download <http://www.cechouston.org/CEC/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/CPP-Pollinator-Grant-2013.pdf>

Stretching Your Dollars With Natives: <http://abclocal.go.com/ktrk/video?id=9288588>

Mosaiculture: <http://myvirtualgarden2.blogspot.com/2013/09/mosaiculture-exhibition.html>

## WEEKLY EVENTS & ANNOUNCEMENTS CALENDAR

Sat., Nov. 16: 8:30 a.m. - 12 p.m: Home Landscape Series Water Conservation Workshop. The public is invited to a workshop that will cover many practical steps that homeowners can take to reduce water use in the landscape and maintain a healthy landscape with plenty of curb appeal. Location: Katy High School at 6331 Highway Blvd. Participants will have hands-on learning opportunities involving irrigation system components, including converting to a drip system and understanding the controller, and assistance in assembling their own take-home rainwater collection barrel. Workshop topics include landscaping to conserve water, irrigation efficiency, managing water supplies, and rainwater harvesting methods. \$25 fee. [www.fbmg.com](http://www.fbmg.com) or call Brandy Rader at 281-633-7029.

Sat., Nov. 16: Great Galveston Tree Giveaway - for Galvestonians only - at 2601 Ball St. (behind City Hall). 1,500 shade trees will be given away from 8 a.m.-noon (or when all are gone). Included will be oak trees, the #1 survivor of Ike's poisonous surge. Residents must bring a utility or water bill to verify island address. Details on this and a Nov. 10 luncheon at Moody Mansion to help celebrate the Nov. 10-26 Arbor Week In Galveston can be found at [www.galvestonislandtreeconservancy.org](http://www.galvestonislandtreeconservancy.org) or by emailing Karla Levy at [karlalevy@aol.com](mailto:karlalevy@aol.com), or Priscilla Files at [TreesForGalveston@yahoo.com](mailto:TreesForGalveston@yahoo.com).

Mon., Nov. 18: Harris County Master Gardeners at Precinct 2 will host Open Garden Day on Monday, Nov. 18 at their Genoa Friendship Garden, 1202 Genoa Red Bluff Rd., Houston, TX 77034. Master Gardeners will be on hand to answer your gardening questions. Hours are 8:30 am - 11:00 am with a program on dividing Overwintering Tropicals at 9:30 am. Free and open to the public. Children invited! <http://hcmga.tamu.edu/Public/>, 281 855 5600

Wed., Nov. 20: "Flora of Ecuador" presented by Houston Cactus & Succulent Society members Dick & Phyllis McEuen. 7:30 pm at the Metropolitan Multi-Service Center, 1475 W. Gray St. Houston, TX 77019. Free.

Thur., Nov. 21: Forest Fungi Walk, 1-3 p.m., Jesse Jones Park and Nature Center, 20634 Kenswick Drive, Humble: <http://www.hcp4.net/jones/> or 281-446-8588.

Thur., Nov. 21: La Marque: "Texas Upper Gulf Coast Citrus Show" 6:30-7 p.m., at Galveston County AgriLife Extension Office in Carbide Park, 4102 Main Street (FM 519), La Marque citrus grown by local gardeners will be on display for the general public. Rosettes and ribbons will be awarded to the best quality entries. Home

citrus growers are encouraged to enter any type of citrus fruit for judging. Details, including dates and times for entry submission will be available at <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/galveston/> Call 281-534-3413, ext. 12, or email [GALV3@wt.net](mailto:GALV3@wt.net) for additional information.

Thur., Nov. 21: La Marque: As a continuation of the Citrus show, Monte L. Nesbitt, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Program Specialist, will present "Citrus for Texas Upper Gulf Coast", 7-8 p.m. at Galveston County AgriLife Extension Office in Carbide Park, 4102 Main Street (FM 519), La Marque The course will cover the topics of citrus variety selection and establishment, production, pest problems, and an update on Citrus Greening and other serious threats. (Pre-registration for this program is not necessary.) For course reservations, call 281-534-3413, ext. 12 or email [GALV3@wt.net](mailto:GALV3@wt.net).

Sat., Dec. 7: Saturday with the Master Gardeners - Garden Talk Topic "Edible Landscape." Join the Fort Bend County Master Gardeners' in their 4 acres of demonstration gardens and talk to the MG volunteers who design and maintain them. It's a great way to learn about gardening and plants well-suited to Fort Bend County. Park in front of the Agriculture Center located at 1402 Band Road, Rosenberg, 77471. Gardens will be open from 9:00-11:00 a.m. on December 7th. Attend an informal garden talk on Edible Landscape which starts at 10:00 a.m. in the E Garden. Call 281-341-7068 or visit [www.fbmj.com](http://www.fbmj.com) for more information.

Wed., Dec. 11: Humble: Casey Scribner and Brooke Judice of Trees for Houston will present "Trees in Urban Areas" noon-2 p.m., Wednesday, December 11, at Mercer Arboretum & Botanic, located one mile north of FM 1960 at 22306 Aldine Westfield Road, Humble. Scribner and Judice will offer information about the importance of trees in an urban environment, recommended trees for our area, plus tips for how to plant and take care of them. For more information, call 281-443-8731 or visit <http://www.hcp4.net/mercer/>

Fri., Jan. 17: 12:00 p.m. - 4:30 pm. 2014 Water Management Seminar For Landowners + Property Managers + Land Planners, presented by OHBA (Organic Horticulture Benefits Alliance). Learn How To Make Every Drop Count. By attending you will receive beneficial information on how to:

- How to Save Water Use
- Reduce Operating Costs
- Protect Your Investment
- Reduce Liabilities
- Have Beautiful & Sustainable Landscapes

The world is changing, Houston is getting much bigger, and we are running short of water. What to do? Organic Landscape Management is the answer. Come join us for an exciting fast-paced afternoon where we learn 'How Easy', 'How Inexpensive' and 'How rational Water Efficient Landscape Management really is'. Location: The United Way Building, 50 Waugh Drive. Register today at [www.eventbrite.com](http://www.eventbrite.com).

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. We list calendar items up to two months ahead of time.

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).

## 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.

Regarding this newsletter, Brenda is the lead writer, originator of it and the daily inspiration for it. We so appreciate the way she has made gardening such a fun way to celebrate life together for such a long time.

## **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 the co-author of the book *Organic Management for the Professional*.

For this newsletter, John contributes articles regularly and is responsible for publishing it.

## **MARK BOWEN**

Mark is a native Houstonian, a horticulturist and organic specialist with a background in garden design, land 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*.

With respect to this newsletter, Mark serves as the editor.

## **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, quality control, and he is a certified compost facility operator.

Pablo helps this newsletter happen from a technical support standpoint.

<http://www.arborgate.com/>

<http://wabashfeed.com/>

<http://microlifefertilizer.com/>

<http://natureswayresources.com/>



**Save 20%: Redeem this coupon for a big discount on Nature's Way Resources "Container Mix" ( <http://natureswayresources.com/products.htm> ). Please note: this offer is for bagged or bulk material purchases by retail customers only at Nature's Way Resources, located at 101 Sherbrook Circle, Conroe TX.**

**Offer Expires: 11/24/13**

