



November 23, 2013

Dear Friends,

Here is the 37th 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.

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**REDUCED LAWNS CAN BE BEAUTIFUL!**

**by BRENDA BEUST SMITH**

One of my favorite programs to give has a rather pompous title: *"Howto Reduce the Size of Your Front Lawn for the Ecology's Sake Without Infuriating Your Neighbors."*

Before you even consider such a move, however, realize that whatever you do to your front lawn WILL impact your neighbors' property values.

Expect raised eyebrows!

More than just personal preference is involved here, should you decide to replace at least part of front grass lawns with other plantings.

To paraphrase WaterSmart's Chris LaChance, those who stray from even-ho-hum-landscape standards must make sure front landscapes always look "Intended - notUntended."

Over the years, I've watched with awe as Museum-area homeowner Michol O'Connor has managed to keep her truly-unconventional-grass-free front landscape (above) look beautifully "tended" yet relatively low maintenance.

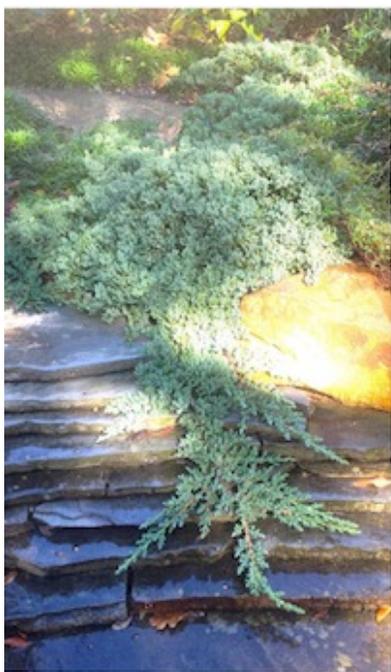
The left hand picture is the front landscape as it appeared around five years ago.

At right, its 2013 look. Michol's definitely raising her "low-maintenance" quotient!

That's dwarf mondo grass giving the nice green look. It grows 5-6" high and is easier than mowing, she says.

Still, weeds do intrude and they have to be pulled by hand. But . . . can't have everything and it's not bad as long as you don't let it get out of hand. The thicker the mondo (monkey) grass grows, the fewer weeds you have.

Michol's yard slopes down toward the street, and she's leveled it somewhat through the use of slate slabs, over which the creeping (trailing) juniper is cascading here.



I'm particularly enamored with Michol's silver ponyfoot (*Dichondra argentea*) at right. It's new this year to Michol's landscape, so I'm anxious to see how it does. This West Texas native, which needs to be extremely well drained, is reportedly not always winter-hardy here.

But then, remember when they said that about bougainvillea, avocados and plumerias? The times they are a'changin'!

Those new to reading these rantings might be wondering "what does she have against grass lawns?"

It's a matter of quantity and coddling . . . not quality.

Some grass is fine, if wanted. Soothing to the eye, cooling in summer, soft to walk upon, cushioning for children to play on, a pretty frame for gardens.

The problem comes with quantity.

St. Augustine grass, our best by far, takes an enormous amount of water to stay green in summer when it normally wants to go dormant, just as it does in winter.

Water is becoming more scarce.

To keep St. A green all summer, we pour on fertilizers and treatments for the bugs and organisms that, quite naturally, move in to complete the decomposition of plants going dormant - just as Mother Nature intended.

Ah, not to be borne! On go the treatments.

Then come our (usual) spring and fall monsoons.

It doesn't matter if those fertilizers/treatments are organic or not. They are washed into storm sewers where they are wreaking havoc with the natural ecology of our bayous - contributing to flooding problems. From there they flow in to Galveston Bay, wreaking more havoc.

Rather than belabor this point, the Chronicle was nice enough to publish some of my rantings: ["Time to Change Our Views on Big Green Lawns."](#)

Still skeptical? Check out this expert view:

[http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/galveston.../your\\_yard\\_&\\_galveston\\_bay.htm](http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/galveston.../your_yard_&_galveston_bay.htm)

So attention, lazy gardeners. You can get a list of tips to redesign and thirst-tame your front yard. Email [lazygardener@sbcglobal.net](mailto:lazygardener@sbcglobal.net).

Among these tips:

1. Start slowly by moving existing garden borders out more, and filling in with low-water, low-care plants.
2. Give up on grass under trees! (More on this in next week's column and in the flyer offered above).
3. Stepping stones, a distinctive border and mulch will make the bed look "intended" not "untended." Ditto for other hardscapes such as boulders, birdbaths, fencing, etc.)

Have you already started reducing lawn grass?

I'd be really interested to see pictures of what you've accomplished.

Please also include a list of the plants you've used to take the place of the removed St. Augustine. Especially those you tried that DIDN'T work, and why.

Email to: [lazygardener@sbcglobal.net](mailto:lazygardener@sbcglobal.net)

Next week: Planting grass-less areas under trees.

## JOHN'S CORNER

### Soil Amendments - Perlite



Recently we have had a couple of our customers ask us to create lightweight special versions of a couple of our specialty soils. They wanted something finer than expanded shale but just as durable and free of toxic chemicals. So, how does one do this? The answer is perlite.

Perlite is made from a volcanic glass that occurs naturally by adding water to obsidian. The obsidian can range from two to six percent water in its structure depending on its source. Obsidian is a shiny black volcanic glass made up of mainly silicon (Si) and oxygen (O) which are the primary ingredients in regular glass, quartz and many other minerals and products. The type of obsidian used to make perlite has a lot of water in its structure (the hydration of obsidian) forming what is known as an amorphous volcanic glass. The obsidian to make perlite is found all over the world with the largest production in and around Turkey. In the United States, New Mexico produces the largest amounts of perlite.

The trapped water causes the obsidian to expand 7-20 times its original volume depending on the source of rock and when it is heated in a certain way. As it is quickly heated to over 1,600 degrees Fahrenheit (671 degrees Celsius), the water expands forming tiny trapped bubbles in the perlite.

Note: If heated slowly, the water will escape and not expand the silicate minerals. This changes the way light is reflected and gives it a whitish color (originally before it was expanded it was black or gray but can also be green, brown, blue or red). Since perlite is a form of natural glass, it is chemically inert, has a neutral pH and is weed free.

Perlite is used in many commercial, industrial and horticultural applications. In industry it is used as an insulator due to its resistance to high heat, in commercial applications it is often used as a filter medium and as an ingredient to make light weight masonry products. It also increase the fire resistance of these products.

Perlite after expansion is screened into various sizes for use in different applications. A medium to coarse screening works best in horticulture.

For horticulture it is used as a soil amendment due to its high permeability (air and water moves through it easily) and low water holding properties (only 3-4 times its weight in water). Hence it is often used to root cuttings and in hydroponics. It has been used in all forms of lightweight planting media from potting mixes to soils for green roofs.

Perlite improves aeration and drainage, and it helps make moisture and nutrients more available to plants. Its porous structure is a home to beneficial microbes, it does not deteriorate, and it is sterile and free of weed seeds and disease. It is also lightweight, odorless and safe to handle.

Perlite should not be used in very acidic soils as the low pH may cause the release of aluminum (Al) which can be toxic to many plants. The only negative from a sustainability point of view is that it requires energy to mine, crush, heat and transport it to various markets, and it is not a renewable resource. However it is much more environmentally friendly than other light weight media like peat moss or coir.

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## 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>

## WEEKLY EVENTS & ANNOUNCEMENTS CALENDAR

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-pace 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.

 **The Arbor Gate**

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



<http://wabashfeed.com/>

  
**MicroLife™**

<http://microlifefertilizer.com/>

  
NATURE'S WAY  
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*an organically based service company*

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**( <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: 11/30/13

