



December 21, 2013

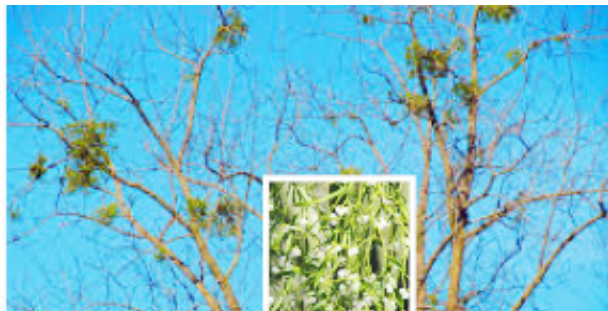
Dear Friends,

Here is the 41st 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 or sign yourself up to receive this newsletter by clicking the "Join Our Mailing List" link just below. We will never sell or share our mailing list to protect the privacy of our subscribers.

Enjoy!

[JOIN OUR MAILING LIST!](#)



WINTER SOLSTICE COMETH and BEFORE YOU GRAB ONLY POINSETTIAS . . .

by BRENDA BEUST SMITH

Saturday, Dec. 21 is the day we celebrate the Winter Solstice, the shortest day and longest night of the year. If we lived in ancient times, we'd be celebrating. From this point on, the nights will - albeit very slowly - get shorter and shorter.

Hollies, such as our native yaupon holly, left above, and mistletoe, center and right, are musts for a winter solstice celebration - for different reasons. And for Yule celebrations as well.

Holly's evergreen habit led Druids to consider it a sacred plant, a cheerful happy one that would keep spirits from hebetating through the bleak winter ahead.

And what holiday decor would be complete without mistletoe, one of the oldest of legendary plants?

Kissing under mistletoe dates back to both Norse and Greek folklore. Long story short, the goddess Frigg so loved her son, she made almost everything that was natural on earth take an oath they would never harm him.

But the mistletoe was so tiny, she overlooked it. A mischievous imp discovered this and killed the son. Frigg's tears became the beautiful berries and - so that mistletoe would never again be used as a weapon - she would place a kiss on everyone who passed under it.

That's why we hang it over doorways, so we will never overlook it again. Who else would tell you these things?



OTHER GREAT HOLIDAY FLOWERS ...

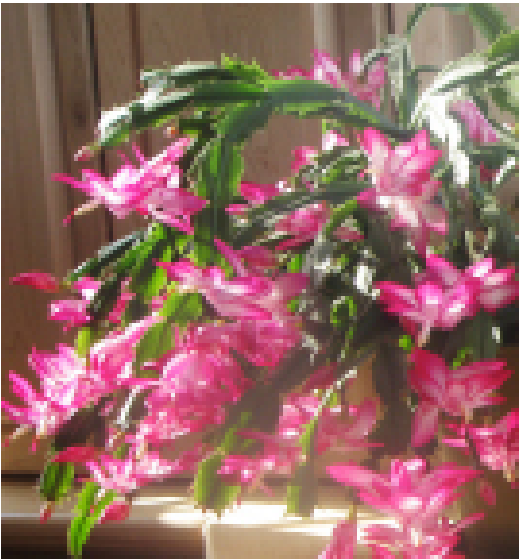
Before you limit Yule decorative plants to poinsettias, take a look at what else is available right now.

I was one of many who cringed at the ineluctable cost of cyclamens, left above. Then I realized how long they hold their flowers. And keep producing even more. Now I consider cyclamens one of the best investments we can make for long-term indoor winter color.

Even better, set them outside. They love cold. In fact, if they start looking peaked, it could be your house is too warm. Set them on the floor at night near a window.

Monkey flowers, center above, also appear in nurseries only this time of year. They're so called because the flower resembles a monkey's face. Don't expect them to last forever. But what a treat for as long as they do!

Kalanchoes, right above, like us better than the other two in that once it warms up in spring, they'll be quite happy planted outside in the garden and should last for years.



In my youth and childhood, I tried hard to get Christmas cactus to bloom. Never worked. Then I saw that episode of **The Waltons** where Olivia, on Christmas Eve, in the middle of a horrible blizzard, goes down into their unheated basement, and brings up a Christmas cactus covered with blooms. It had been down there all alone since fall.

About that same time, Husband's Grandma Hazel moved here from Oklahoma into a small frame house in Rose City. She brought her huge Christmas cactus and, in winter, set it in a back room that was closed off in winter, receiving no heat at all. I know she never watered it during this period, and suspect Olivia didn't either.

Both Olivia and Hazel, in late December, brought forth huge Christmas cactuses, covered with hundreds, maybe thousands, of blooms.

Oh, what the heck. I didn't have an unheated room or basement. So I set my Christmas cactus out behind the pond, where it wouldn't drown in our heavy rains. Forgot all about it. Sure enough, it bloomed.

Right now there's one sitting out by the driveway tucked under the Rosedown gardenia. I meant to put it up behind the pond but forgot. Only noticed it the other day because it's covered with little pink buds!

If you don't like my "ignore it" regime, google Christmas cactus. You'll get all sorts of advice on how to get it to bloom.

As with the Christmas cactus, geraniums and rosemary, center and right above respectively, also want excellent drainage. Both like cold weather. Both can take a some sun, rosemary more than geraniums.

But mostly they want great drainage so their roots never stay wet long, a challenge during our often heavy, prolonged rains. Lucia (of Lucia's Garden) used to have gorgeous rosemary plants astride the steps that led up to her well-raised store property. Biggest I've ever seen in Houston.

What about those delightful topiary rosemary trees?

Sure you can keep them going. I remember Odette McMurray with her teeny tiny manicure scissors, meticulously pruning her beautiful little topiaries every day. They were gorgeous. They were also a lot of work. That's what it will take to keep those rosemary "trees" looking like they do when you buy them. But even if you let them go, they should keep growing.

The important thing on all these is not to overwater! Once a week submerge the pot in a bowl of water. Let it

drain completely before setting back in its permanent spot. That's all! If you're going to put them right into soil, make sure it's an extremely well drained area. Work in a lot of organic matter and mulch well.

Hope you have a wonderful Christmas and are able to give a gift of kindness to someone you don't know.



HAPPY HOLIDAYS & HAPPY NEW YEAR
FROM BRENDA, JOHN, PABLO & MARK!
Our newsletter will take a brief break next
week and will return on January 3rd.

JOHN'S CORNER

Soil Amendments - Peat Moss

Peat Moss is widely used in gardening and horticulture. However have you ever considered the question; is it the best choice and what are the consequences of using it?

Historically, peat has been used as a fuel, for insulation, for building bricks, as a planting medium, and as a top dressing for potted plants in floral arrangements.

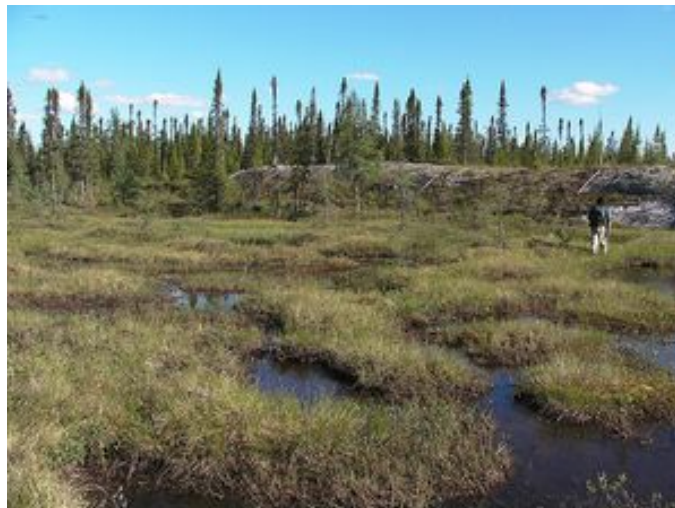


Peat moss is from a group of plants called Sphagnum that is a genus of over 350 species of mosses. These plants grow in wetlands found in cooler climates and are an extremely important part of our ecosystem in cleaning water, removing pollution and storing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere (more than any other ecosystem). These bogs capture 110 tons of carbon every year from the atmosphere and store more than 562 billion tons of carbon even though they compose only 3% of the land and fresh water areas. Mining of peat requires the draining of wetlands, drying, milling, packaging and transportation of the product many thousands of miles to market, all of which require energy which releases tremendous amounts of CO₂ to the atmosphere.

Some companies in Canada and in the Northern states have started trying to reestablish bogs after mining which is a step in the right direction. However, scientists say it takes over 90 years to just reestablish the original biodiversity and much longer to become a fully functioning wetland.

Over 10 million cubic yards are harvested each year in Canada and another 1 million cubic yards in the USA. It takes about 1,000 years for a one yard thick layer of peat to accumulate; hence tens of thousands of acres of wetlands are destroyed each year.

Peat forms over many thousands of years in these bogs, swamps and other wetlands. Peat grows on the surface of the bog where there is oxygen. As the plants die they settle to the bottom where there is very little if any oxygen (anaerobic) and slowly decays forming thick mats of partially decomposed plant material.



This decayed and dried sphagnum moss is often called peat or peat moss. More correctly the live moss growing on top of a bog is called Sphagnum moss and the dead decaying matter underneath is called sphagnum peat moss or just peat moss. These plants provide a habitat for other wetland plants like sedges, orchids, carnivorous and many other plant species.

More than 90% of the extremely valuable wetland peat bogs in England and New Zealand have been destroyed by the mining of peat. Many countries now prohibit or have placed severe restrictions on the mining of peat wetlands and the sale of peat moss.

Sphagnum and peat do not decay readily due to phenolic compounds in the plants cells. As the new moss grows it pushes the older moss down into the bog where it slowly decays often reaching many feet in thickness with the older more decomposed peat moss at the bottom.



The most valuable form of peat in horticulture is the layer that forms just under the surface with deeper layers becoming lower and lower in quality and value. This is why a gardener often sees big price differences for peat moss at the garden centers. The worthless low quality peat moss is sold at the lower prices because it does not work well.

The reason this low quality peat moss is sold, is for the producers of peat moss to make more money. Once they have spent the money to dig ditches and drain the wetland, construct roads, create drying beds, etc. to mine the good peat moss, it costs very little extra to remove the worthless bottom layers also. They just package it up and sell it. High quality peat moss is often used for growing orchids. The standard low quality peat moss (and most other products) sold in most chain nurseries and box stores works poorly if at all, making many people think they do not have a "green thumb."

The surface moss and the high quality peat moss layer can hold 16-20 times their dried weight in water in their cells. The low quality peat moss at the bottom does not hold near the same amount of water or have the beneficial properties hence it is sometimes sold under the name of "Peat Humus" to get unsuspecting customer to buy it.

Due to its very acidic nature, peat moss can absorb cations (plant nutrients) such as calcium and magnesium and release hydrogen ions into the soil (which causes the acidity). It is so acidic it can kill bacteria (good or bad), and as a result was used as a bandaging material in treating wounds as recently as WWII.

Several companies selling peat moss recommend using it as a mulch. It makes a terrible mulch for many reasons:

- 1) It is highly acidic and by extension very bad for most plants, it forms unsightly surface cracks when it dries out.
- 2) It is very light, causing it to blow and wash away in wind and rain events.
- 3) It is dusty and difficult to apply (especially when it is windy), and it provides very little if any nutrition to the plants.

Horticultural research has shown that we now have many alternatives to peat moss that work better, at lower cost, and do not have the environmental consequences. A few of these are composted bark, compost and mulches, substrates made from cow manure, brewery wastes, coconut coir, olive mill waste, pulp and paper by products, peanut hulls, and of course perlite, vermiculite and pumice. Even PTS (Pine Tree Substrate) has been found to work better on many species of plants. Many of these substrates have repeatedly worked better than peat in terms of plant vigor and quality!

PROS:

- readily available
- light in weight
- good structural stability
- ability to hold water
- good aeration (high porosity) IF sphagnum peat moss
- low in microbes
- good to store bulbs and tubers over the winter as it is anti-microbial (Ancient cultures used peat to store food in)

CONS:

- virtually devoid of nutrients
- extremely acidic (low pH) and must be neutralized for use with most plants
- very difficult to re-wet once it becomes dry
- repels water when dry
- often not sterilized and may contain pathogens
- inhibits the growth of microbes initially but quickly becomes conducive for the rapid development of pathogens
- peat moss from lower layers is often very fine in particle size and as a result does not have good aeration as the better grades do
- low anion capacity hence negatively charged anions like phosphate and nitrate will easily leach from the media
- Some people experience a skin disease causing lesions when exposed to peat moss (rare). It is from the fungus Cutaneous sporotrichosis and is more common with sphagnum moss. Several states have laws requiring nursery workers to wear double gloves and micron filtration masks when handling peat moss. Those using peat moss regularly are at risk for developing pneumonias and other illnesses.

Conclusion:

Peat moss is environmentally bankrupt in today's gardening environment and one should not purchase and use it.

FREE TREES ARE READY!

Trees For Houston currently has thousands of trees in 3-gallon containers ready for pick-up.

Species available include wild plum, various oak species, sugarberry, cedar, maple persimmon, paw paw, sycamore, sweet gum, poplar buckeye, holly, cedar elm, red bud, mulberry, river birch. Email Casey (casey@treesforhouston.org) or Barry (barry@treesforhouston.org) to make arrangements for pick-up or delivery of your FREE trees.

WEEKLY EVENTS & ANNOUNCEMENTS CALENDAR

Sat., Jan. 4: Saturday with the Master Gardeners - Garden Talk Topic "Backyard Fruit Production,"

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. Take one of the sidewalks back to the area behind the building where you'll find the gardens and Master Gardeners at work.

Gardens will be open from 9:00-11:00 a.m. on January 4th. Attend an informal garden talk on Backyard Fruit Production in the Orchard which starts at 10:00 a.m. Call 281-341-7068 or visit www.fbmg.com for more information.

Sun., Jan. 5: Spring Vegetable Gardening. WHAT: Learn what varieties to plant and when, soil prep, fertilization, seed planting, transplanting and trellising. This class will cover the types and varieties of vegetables that can be planted in early and late spring. Weather permitting, we will walk to the campus garden to do a few planting demonstrations. Continuing Professional Education (CPE) credit is available. WHEN: Sunday, January 5th, 2:30-5:00pm. WHERE: University of Houston. <http://urbanharvest.org/classes>

Wed., Jan. 8: Mercer Arboretum & Botanic Garden's 40th Anniversary Celebration. Starts at 11 a.m. Join The Mercer Society (TMS) and Commissioner R. Jack Cagle to celebrate Mercer's 40th birthday during an open house. This kickoff event will mark the beginning of festivities scheduled throughout 2014 to commemorate this special year in Mercer's history, and the statue of Thelma Mercer will be rededicated at its new location near the entrance of the

park. For more information or to confirm your attendance, please call 281-443-8731.

Mon., Jan. 13: HUG (www.HoustonUrbanGardeners.org) will meet Mon Jan 13, 6:30 PM at the Metropolitan Multi-Service Center, 1475 W. Gray, Houston. Mary and Roger Demeny will talk about Kitchen Gardening. Free.

Tue., Jan 14: Harris County Master Gardeners at Precinct 2 -Green Thumb Series will present an educational program on Soils and Composting on Tuesday January 14, at 6:30 p.m. Free and open to the public. Clear Lake Park meeting room, (on the lakeside), 5001 Nasa Parkway, Seabrook Texas 77586. <http://hcmga.tamu.edu>, 281 855 5600

Wed., Jan. 15: Harris County Master Gardeners at Precinct 2 - 3rd Wednesday Lecture Series. On Wednesday January 15, Heidi Sheesley of Treeseach Farms will present a program on the Fruit and Citrus Trees available at the Master Gardener sale on February 15 at Campbell Hall in Pasadena. Free and open to the public. Clear Lake Park meeting room, (on the lakeside), 5001 Nasa Parkway, Seabrook Texas 77586. <http://hcmga.tamu.edu> , 281-855-5600.

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.

Sat., January 18: Urban Harvest's 14th Annual Fruit Tree Sale:

WHAT: The largest single-day fruit tree sale in the country, offering over 100 varieties of fruit trees! The trees are grown locally, acclimated to the Gulf Coast region and grafted onto root stock adapted to our soil. WHEN: Saturday, January 18th. 9am to 1pm, or until we sell out. WHERE: Rice University, Greenbriar Parking Lot 5600 Greenbriar Drive, Houston, TX 77005. See our website for more information! <http://urbanharvest.org/fruit-tree-sale>

Get Ready for the Urban Harvest Fruit Tree Sale with these Fruit Tree Classes:

Sat., Jan. 4: Fruit Tree Care, 10am-12pm

Fri., Jan. 10: How to Prune and Train Fruit Trees, 4pm-6pm

Sat., Jan. 11: Prepare for the Fruit Tree Sale Talk, 9:30am-12 pm

Tues., Jan. 14: Prepare for the Fruit Tree Sale Talk, 6:30pm-9pm

Fri., Jan. 24: Pruning Your Apples, Pears and Berries, 4pm-6pm

Fri., Jan. 31: Pruning Your Peaches, Nectarines and Plums, 4pm-6pm

Sat., Feb. 1: Grafting Fruit Trees, 9am-12pm

Fri., Feb. 7: Pruning Your Grapes, Muscadines, Jujubes, etc., 4pm-6pm

Fri., Feb. 21: Pruning Citrus, Pomegranates, Avocados, Figs & Tropicals, 4pm-6pm

Thur., Mar. 6: Avocado, Citrus and Sub-Tropical Fruits, 7pm-9pm

For more info: <http://urbanharvest.org/classes>

Sat., Jan. 18, 2014: Master Gardener Fruit and Citrus Tree Sale Preview

Join the Fort Bend Master Gardeners on Saturday, January 18, 2014 for a program to preview the trees and plants to be sold at their Annual Fruit and Citrus Tree Sale. It will include how to heel in your fruit trees, pruning and how to plant as well as an overview of plants at the sale. The program will be held at the Bud O'Shieles Community Center located at 1330 Band Road, Rosenberg, TX 77471. The doors open at 8:30 a.m. and the program will be from 9:00

a.m. until 11:00 a.m.. For more information call 281-341-7068 or visit www.fbmj.com

Mon., Jan. 20: Harris County Master Gardeners at Precinct 2 will host Open Garden Day on Monday, January 20 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 an educational program at 9:30 am. Free and open to the public. Children invited! <http://hcmga.tamu.edu> , 281-855-5600.

Sat., Jan. 25: Master Gardeners Fruit Tree Sale Features Dwarf Apples, New Plums, Goji Berries

Harris County Master Gardeners will hold their annual Fruit Tree Sale and Symposia Jan. 25, 9 a.m.-1 p.m., at the Texas A&M Agrilife Extension Office, 3033 Bear Creek Dr. The event is preceded by a free overview of the trees being sold at 8 a.m. in the auditorium. For information about this or other upcoming Master Gardener events and programs, visit our Website at hcmga.tamu.edu, give us a call at 281.855.5600.

Sat., Jan. 25: Master Gardener Fruit and Citrus Tree Sale.

The Fort Bend Master Gardeners will hold their Annual Fruit and Citrus Tree Sale on Saturday, January 25, 2014, at the Fort Bend County Fairgrounds - Barn H, 4310 Highway 36S, Rosenberg, 77471. The sale will open at 9:00 a.m. and will run until 1:00 p.m. or until sold out. For more information call 281-341-7068 or visit www.fbmj.com

Sat., Jan. 25: 8-9 a.m. Fruit and Nut Tree Sale Presentation & Sale - At the Montgomery County A&M AgriLife Extension Office. A Pre-Sale Program highlighting the plants in this Sale will be held at 8 am Saturday, at the Extension Office. Our Montgomery County Horticultural Agent will present an informative program highlighting plants in the sale, plant selection, and planting information. **The Fruit & Nut Tree Sale** Runs from 9 a.m. - 1 p.m. also on the 25th at the same location. <http://www.mcmga.com/test-public-calendar/>

Tue., Jan. 28. Open Garden Days Re-Launched at Bear Creek Master Gardener Demonstration Gardens

Garden enthusiasts are invited to visit the Demonstration Gardens surrounding the Harris County Texas Agrilife Extension Office, 3033 Bear Creek Dr., Houston, 9-11:30 a.m., the fourth Tuesday of each month beginning Jan. 28. Visitors will learn what grows best in Harris County by attending the Open Garden Day with mini-workshops for adults, educational activities for kids and garden tours with Harris County Master Gardeners available to answer questions about horticulture and landscaping. Workshops and activities will start at 10a.m. and cover topics related to the Green Thumb Gardening Series of lectures, held throughout the county. The January topic is Soil and Composting. The demonstration gardens include an area showcasing numerous ways to turn yard waste and food scraps into black gold for your garden beds. (281) 855-5600

March 1-2: Spring Branch African Violet Club's 33rd Annual Show and Spring Sale at Judson Robinson, Jr., Community Center, 2020 Hermann Park Drive. Mar. 1, 10am-4pm; Mar. 2, 10am-3pm. Violets of all types, including standards, miniatures and trailers, Gesneriads such as Episcias and Streps along with supplies. Club members on hand to answer questions. Details: Karla Ross, 281-748-8417; kjwross@yahoo.com.

Submit calendar items to 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.

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 "Herb 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: 01/07/13

