



LAZY GARDENER & FRIENDS

Houston Garden Newsletter



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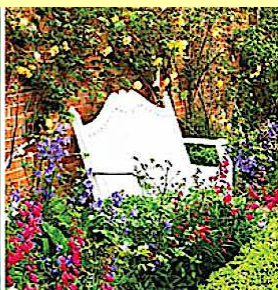
Nature's Way Resources owner John Ferguson, "The Lazy Gardener" Brenda Beust Smith and Pablo Hernandez welcome your feedback and are so grateful to the many horticulturists who contribute their expertise.

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CORONAVIRUS CANCELLATIONS

If your event in our calendar below is cancelled, please let us know as soon as possible at lazygardener@sbcglobal.net



WOW NOWs TO HELP SHRINKING YARDS . . . FLOOD LOVERS FIGHTING FIRE ANTS

"To plant a garden is to believe in tomorrow."

-- Audrey Hepburn

by **BRENDA BEUST SMITH**

OUR YARDS ARE SHRINKING. It's a given these days and not all bad. True, the bigger the yard, the more flowers it will hold. But large yards also usually mean more maintenance.

Floral color and beauty that utilize vertical spread without sacrificing horizontal space are more important than ever.

Most of our plantings are at eye level or pull the eye

downward. Blooms up and down tall vertical stalks help pull the eye upward, hopefully adding sky into our personal vistas. Here are a couple of tall, skinny WOW NOWs that might fit challenging-to-landscape spots. For example . . .

DALE PHILLIPS' SHIRLEY TEMPLE HIBISCUS is already 7+' tall with such a narrow spread -- without any pruning help! Huge white blooms are icing on the cake. This Buchanan's Native Plants purchase has exploded upward in the past 3 years.

Dale also has hopes for a predicted 8' upward reach on his pink Shirley Temple hibiscus (from Maas Nursery). But he is making allowances on her for recent severe damage from a fire ant infestation. More on this lady below!



ARLEEN HARBIN'S FUZZY BOLIVIAN SAGE (*Salvia oxyphora*) is now a just-shy-of-6' eye-popper with a narrow 16" horizontal spread (without pruning). This full sun lover was planted just this past spring at the suggestion of fellow Fort Bend County Master Gardener Tricia Bradbury. Easy to grow, a major hummer attractor.

PS. Arleen's white night blooming cereus (see [June 12 issue](#)) now has 22 blooms with more buds developing!!

* * *

When you're dealing with small planting sites, pay attention to these common mistakes limited space plantings pointed out by Monrovia landscapers in their current [DESIGN SCHOOL newsletter](#).

Most Common Small Space Landscaping Errors:

1. Not paying attention to the middle layer. Use plants with enough height to create levels.
2. Not allowing for mature size of the tallest plants — a battle in the making that you cannot win. Believe the plant tags.
3. Opting for flowering plants over those with wonderful foliage. Great leaves make flowers look even better! ([More Monrovia suggestion](#))

* * *



GIANT WHITE SPIDER LILIES — Looks like a banner year for these Gulf Coast natives. My cousin **GEORGE BEUST III** posted his mother **DRENDA BEUST's** *Hymenocallis* on Facebook.

These are an ultimate lazy gardener plant, ideal for



anywhere, but especially spots where water stands after a rain. To improve drainage in adjacent spots, dig the hole deeper than usual, fill top 1/3+ with gravel, then "plant" these bulbs in the gravel (necks just above ground). They'll love it and neighboring areas will drain into this "pit" when we have our monsoon rains. Don't do this near your house or other buildings. This will return valuable moisture to your subsoil, helping to water trees during droughts and slow the foundation cracks that plague this area (due in part to lost subsoil moisture).

* * *



FIRE ANTS IN PLANTS As promised above, a few extra words on fire ants. Don't take these lightly! Nasty red bumps covering my ankle right now have been itching for over a week. Fire ants are especially dangerous for children and for elderly folks who tend to move slowly. Much is made of tall, rock-hard mounds, but they're equally as likely to nest under mulch or in pots.

Dale Phillips' potted pink Shirley Temple hibiscus was obviously ailing. He tipped the pot over to check the roots. The soil was a mass of fire ants and roots had been chewed to dust. It's said setting pots up so air can circulate underneath helps to discourage fire ants. Dale's pot was on cinder blocks. Dale treated, then replanted the hibiscus, in the ground this time. All the leaves fell off. He lost hope. But, as you can see above, his pink Shirley Temple hibiscus, bought at Mass Nursery, is now mending nicely.



FIRE ANTS These imported insects are usually smaller than our natives (which we need!) but move MUCH faster. Native ants, when disturbed, run around rather haphazardly, seemingly confused by the invasion. Eventually they might, or might not, find and bite you if you hang around.

Fire ants have no problem identifying and attacking invaders. With incredible speed, they aim for, and stab, the closest reachable human skin. No confusion. No delay. In home yards, they usually like undisturbed areas, like the base of trees, where bark meets soil. They usually won't kill mature trees. My last attack occurred when I was stripping lower growth off the esperanza (Tecoma stans) I'm trying to turn into a multi-trunked tree.

In his column below John Ferguson gives an in depth look at our fire ant challenges, including explaining why common Old Wives Tales are not only wrong, they can be dangerous to apply:

- Use grits or hot boiling water to kill fire ants
- Scoop up one one fire ant mound and put it on another so they will

"fight it out" (Is anyone really that brave? Or ignorant?)

PS: "Fuego" is Spanish for 'Fire' (wink, wink). You'll understand below. And, Husband agrees with John about leaving single fire ant mounds alone if they're off the beaten path. I'm not that nice!

***"LAZY GARDENER SPEAKER LIST" & "PUBLICITY BOOKLET"
& Brenda's "LAZY GARDENERS GUIDE ON CD" are free
— email request to: lazygardenerbrenda@gmail.com***

***Brenda's column in the LAZY GARDENER & FRIENDS HOUSTON GARDEN
NEWSLETTER is based on her 40+ years as the Houston Chronicle's Lazy Gardener***



FIRE ANTS

We often get asked questions from customers to readers of the newsletter on how to control fire ants. There are both cultural and physical/chemical methods to help control this pest.

Managing fire ants starts with observing nature. If we look at the forest, we rarely have fire ant mounds in the trees but at the edge of forests and in grass lands we do have fire ants. Have you ever considered why?

The soil in the forest microbiome is dominated by fungal species while the most of the grassy area are extremely bacteria dominated. The fungal hyphae will invade an ant bed and digest the larva for nutrients, and they often produce natural glues like glomalin that creates problems for the ants. Many microbes and insects that live in a forest soil environment from beetles to beneficial nematodes all love to eat fire ants or their eggs, hence it is not a good home for fire ants.

Last fall I toured a restored prairie where the native grasses were over six feet tall and full of forbs, wildflowers, etc. that had replaced the King Ranch Bluestem and Bermuda. Native prairies are a fungal dominated system. On the 300-acre property I did not observe a single fire ant mound. Were they there? Probably, but in a very low population density.

It has been observed that fire ants do not set up shop in flowerbeds that have a 3-4-inch layer of aged (composted) native mulch which is highly fungal dominated. However, they will form a mound at the edge of where the flowerbed meets the grass.

Many years ago, a group in town observed that a large area (maybe 100 feet by 200 feet, I do not remember exactly) that was covered with several inches of aged native mulch. They were working on building soil quality before starting

a garden. This area only had 1-2 fire ant mounds around the edges. There was a second area similar in size where they used bark mulch to cover it. This area had many fire ant mounds scattered all through it.

If you remember from our study of mulches a few years ago, bark mulches have chemicals in them that prevent decomposition by killing the microbes that decompose organic matter. The chemicals in the bark mulch killed many of the good microbes that would attack the fire ant eggs, hence it made a good home for them. There has never been a rigorous study done, however many people have observed the same pattern.

This is why low-quality mulch is not a bargain as it not only hurts soil health and as a result it makes a good home for fire ants. In addition to barks, the dyed or ashen mulches or often found to have more fire ant mounds as they hurt soil health (microbial content).

The soil microbiome of our lawns is similar to the pastures and is bacterial dominated, which fire ants seem to love. When we top dress our lawns with compost, use a good organic fertilizer or humates to increase all biological activity of the soil and a significant increase in good fungus species. Thus, over time our yards become less attractive to fire ants. Note: They prefer grasses that have been mowed short. If St. Augustine is cut four inches tall or more, it is not as attractive to fire ants.

A customer shared the photo below on how his St. Augustine grass was being colonized with fungi.



Several times in this column I have mentioned in passing that a good compost tea can be an effective treatment, as can orange oil. Also, dry molasses is reported to repel them (actually I think it stimulates microbial growth that attack the fire ants).

Many years ago, there was a liquid fire ant killer developed by Malcom Beck the founder of GardenVille composting company, called Gardenville Fire Ant

Mound Treatment, which was just compost tea, orange oil, and molasses and was very effective as a mound drench. The Texas state chemist made them take it off the market since it killed fire ants and was not registered as a pesticide. They later repackaged it as a soil amendment called "Anti-Fuego"

Often after stepping into a fire ant mound and getting bit several dozen times, my softer compassionate side is severely depressed and all I am thinking about is revenge. So, I turn to a product from Nature's Creation (there are other similar products on the market).

This is a diatomaceous earth mixed with pyrethrum's and is an extremely effective as a mound kill as they start dying in minutes. Diatoms are animals whom make their shell out of quartz and when they die the shell becomes fractured into microscopic razor blades. The ants crawl over the powder and it scratches their exoskeleton which allows the pyrethrum to enter their bodies. Pyrethrums from the chrysanthemum plant acts as a neurotoxin. The ants start staggering around like they are drunk, start falling off of things, and then die. Note: These type products work best if one breaks up the mound and get the ants very mad and swarming all over the place. They get the material on their bodies and carry it back deep into the mound where it can reach other ants.

Often, one treatment kills the mound, but if it does not, they will rebuild a couple feet away but much smaller mound. A repeat treatment eliminates them.



For mounds that one cannot see or get to easily, baits can be an effective tool. My favorite that I have had good luck with is Fertilome's, "Come and Get It" shown below.



Brenda mention the grits myth in her column above. Grits are made from corn meal, and fire ants love corn meal hence it is often used in baits like the one above.

Brenda also mentioned the transferring ants from one mound to another. Originally, fire ants fought and killed each other creating territories that they defended. In the late 1960's our government mandated aerial spraying of the very toxic organochloride insecticide called Mirex. As a result, the ants no longer fought and killed each other, they developed multiple queens per mound so the nest would survive. Most likely back then if one mixed ants from different colonies, before the Mirex spraying, they probably would attack and kill each other. Mirex also killed our native ants that were highly competitive with fire ants hence the fire ant problem became many many times worse.

Fire ants do provide benefits as their digging activities help loosen soils and increase aeration and water infiltration. They also eat ticks, fleas and chiggers. They are also food for many other insects and microbes. Hence, they do provide some benefit.

Personally, if a mound is in a location where people or animals may step in it, then I will treat it. I also will treat mounds if they are near an electrical outlet or device as it seems they are attracted to electricity. If the mound is the back of a flowerbed or other out of the way location then I leave it alone as they are providing more benefit than harm.

HAVE YOU TRIED
is taking a break. It will return soon!

LAZY GARDENER & FRIENDS HOUSTON GARDEN NEWSLETTER CALENDAR EVENTS

ADULT GARDEN PLANT EVENTS ONLY

ALWAYS CHECK TO MAKE SURE YOUR EVENT IS IN! HOWEVER . . .

PLEASE READ BEFORE SUBMITTING EVENTS!

- Events *NOT* submitted in the EXACT format below may take 2 weeks or longer to be reformatted/retyped and added to calendar.
- Events in this EXACT format (below) are copied/pasted immediately in upcoming calendar. Pdfs or flyers need re-typing - only delay publication.
- Submit to: lazygardenerbrenda@gmail.com. Put group name in email subject.

CHECK WEBSITES FOR . . .

- **COVID-19 - RELATED PRECAUTIONS AT EVENTS**
- **UPDATED CALENDAR BEFORE ATTENDING ANY PREVIOUSLY-SCHEDULED**
- **LAST MINUTE CANCELLATION.**

SAT., JULY 18: FALL VEGETABLE GARDENING, 9:30am-12:00pm. Zoom Live Class by Invitation, \$20. Urban Harvest class. Register: urbanharvest.org/education/classes/

MON., JULY 13: STARTING YOUR FALL GARDEN by SCOTT HOWARD, 7pm, Houston Urban Gardeners ZOOM or Google meeting. Free. Details: houstonurbangardeners.org

THURS., JULY 16: SIMPLE HABITAT PONDS, 7pm, Native Plant Society of Texas/Houston ZOOM event. Register: npsot.org/wp/houston/

SAT., AUG. 8: BOKASHI – WASTE NOT, WANT NO, 9:30am-11:30am. Zoom Live Class by Invitation, \$20. Urban Harvest class. Register: urbanharvest.org/education/classes/

TUES., AUG 18: TEXAS MASTER NATURALIST COASTAL PRAIRIE CHAPTERS FALL TRAINING CLASS BEGINS. \$125. Evening & Saturday classes. coastalprairie.org; carol@coastalprairie.org.

TUES., NOV. 17: HEIRLOOM PLANTS by GREG GRANT, 10am; St. Basil's Hall, 702 Burney Road, Sugar Land. Free. Sugar Land Garden Club event. sugarlandgardenclub.org

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LOCAL FARMERS MARKETS

- [URBAN HARVEST FARMERS MARKET](#), Saturdays, 8am-noon, in St. John's School parking lot, 2752 Buffalo Speedway.
- [FULSHEAR FARMERS MARKET](#) Saturdays, 9am-1pm, 9035 Bois d'Arc Lane @ FM 1093, Fulshear.
- [THE WOODLANDS FARMERS MARKET AT GROGAN'S MILL](#), Saturdays, 8am-noon, Grogan's Mill Shopping Center Parking Lot, 7 Switchbud Pl., The Woodlands
- [BEAUTY'S GARDEN](#) is now participating in the Acres Homes Farmers Market Saturday, 10am-2pm, 4333 W Little York Rd.
- [WESTCHASE DISTRICT FARMERS MARKET](#), Thursdays, opens 3pm, St. Cyril of Alexandria Catholic Church, 10503 Westheimer Road (at

Rogerdale Road, one block west of Beltway 8)

Although normally we did not run out-of-garden events, during this pandemic period when most gardening events have been cancelled, we are happy to publish a running list of local Farmers Markets.
Send notices to lazygardenerbrenda@gmail.com

For event submission rules, see top of calendar

If we inspire you to attend any of these,
please let them know you heard about it in . . .

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www.bartlett.com



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 -- started in the early '70s as a fun side-, it then ranked as the longest-running, continuously-published local newspaper column in the Greater Houston area.

Brenda's gradual sideways step from reporter into gardening writing -- first as a just-a-fun side Chronicle assignment in the early '70s -- led first to an 18-year series of when-to-do-what Lazy Gardener Calendars, then to her Lazy Gardener's Guide book which morphed into her Lazy Gardener's Guide on CD. which she now emails free upon request.

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 specialty shows on HoustonPBS (Ch. 8) and her call-in "EcoGardening" show on KPFT-FM.

For over three decades, Brenda served as as Production Manager of the Garden Club of America's BULLETIN magazine. Although still an active broad-based freelance

writer, Brenda's main focus now is THE LAZY GARDENER & FRIENDS HOUSTON GARDEN NEWSLETTER with John Ferguson and Pablo Hernandez of Nature's Way Resources.

A native of New Orleans and graduate of St. Agnes Academy and the University of Houston, Brenda lives in Humble, TX, and is married to the 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.

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.

