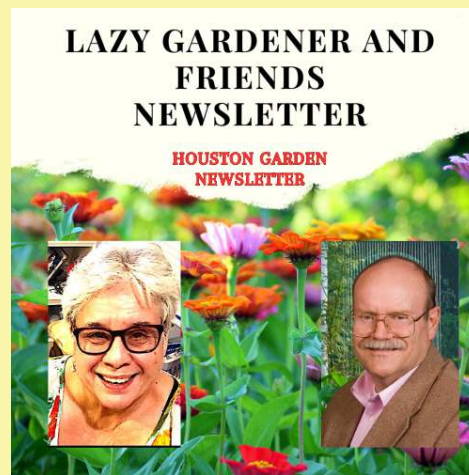


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Nature's Way Resources honors the contributions of our late founder, John Ferguson. "The Lazy Gardener," Brenda Beust Smith, and Shelby Cassano welcome your feedback and remain grateful to the many horticulturists who share their expertise.



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Still blooming despite heat and no watering! Blooming Now: L-R: Queen's Lace, orange daylilies with white swamp lilies, giant white milkweed, and hibiscus

By Brenda Beust Smith | The Lazy Gardener

As I write this, TV newscasters are cheerfully (*sounds like*) "bragging" about our "officially"-reached-100-plus degrees. (*They must not be gardeners!*)

If predictions are accurate, September will bring new rains and more heat. Not a good start for plants when we (and they) are anxious to start enjoying our gardens again! Heat index aside, it's a great time to take inventory. Many plants will survive this summer, given right watering at right time (early morning or late, late afternoon).

Don't be surprised by sudden fall dieback. But also don't give up on any plants; keep loving, watering, and giving them a chance to resprout sick-looking leaves or new shoots from roots. I love it that experts recommend NOT removing sun/drought-killed leaves! These, they point out, will continue to shade healthy leaves below.

Weathermen are "carefully" predicting rains ahead. One can only hope. Still water, just be sure to keep standing water OFF leaves. Sunburn and fungal

invaders thrive on wet leaves. Poke hose down into ground, even if you have to dig a little hole. You'll lose less water to evaporation.

Celebrate your survivors during this blasted summer! And share your survivors, to help educate newcomers. Send to lazygardenerbrenda@gmail.com. Would love to use your full name (or just first) and area of town. (This latter is important. Even though we write only to Greater Houston, far north GH'ers can have some pretty different problems from far south gardeners!

Some Sept. chores you probably don't want to skip given our past-plant-weakening summer:

- Spread wildflower seeds (ideally in raised beds) will do better next spring than they will planted later or in spring.
- Toward end of month, reduce watering on bulbs starting to go dormant.
- Dance on beds after planting wildflower (or any) seed. Seed/soil contact is vital.
- Plant bulbs in clumps among perennials and shrubs. Their sculptured greenery intensifies colors of nearby bloomers even when not flowering.
- Refrigerate tulips, hyacinths, muscari and crocus 4-6 weeks before planting. They need more cold than we can supply.
- Remove spent flowers from crape myrtles and vitex so they'll bloom again.
- Cut back okra and tomatoes so (hopefully) will bear again.
- Plant perennials, especially natives, and hardy shrubs to establish strong root systems before next summer.
- Divide cannas, daylilies, Louisiana iris and violets if they didn't bloom up to par this year.
- Pick flowers to enjoy indoors if heavy rains are forecast. This may trigger more blooms!
- Give groundcovers a slight haircut to encourage spreading. Perfect time to start cuttings of softwood plants like impatiens, begonias, etc.
- Start cuttings of favorite impatiens, begonias and similar softwood plants.

LAZY GARDENERS' FAVORITE ORDERS:

- Don't overwater gardens. Overwatering is one reason plants don't bloom well.
- Don't remove dead roses. Leave on so plant knows dormant time is coming.
- Don't panic over fuzzy brown balls on backsides of oak (and other tree) leaves. Insect galls, good guys! Leave them alone. May also appear as woody balls on trunks. When the insect inside hatches (by spring), they'll disappear.
- Don't plant pansies yet. Still too hot.
- Don't water aloe vera as much as before. They're going dormant.

WHY DIDN'T MY PLANT BLOOM? COULD BE ...

- Wrong spot? Too much/not enough sun? Not enough/too much water? All affect blooming. Make sure drought-tolerant plants are in beds raised 1-2' to protect roots from excessive moisture during heavy rains.
- Too young? Some plants, especially trees and shrubs, need to set strong root systems before they turn energies toward blooming. No one else will tell you these things, will they?)

- Wrong fertilizer? High nitrogen fertilizers (high first number) promote green growth with no flowers. For flowers, use a balanced fertilizer or one with higher middle number (high phosphorus). Exception: hibiscus need a balanced fertilizer only. Sprinkle coffee grounds and/or banana peels in the soil. If all else fails, at night beat plants with a broom's straw end. Why at night? So your neighbors won't see you, of course!

* * *

Potpourri

Don't forget to stop by the Nature's Way Resources Booth at:

The 84th Bulb and Plant Mart will be held Oct. 8-10, 2026

Thursday, October 8 5 – 7 p.m.

Friday, October 9 9 a.m. – 4 p.m.

Saturday, October 10 9 a.m. – 1 p.m.

**The Church of St. John the Divine
2450 River Oaks Blvd, Houston, TX 77019**

- **ATTN. GARDEN/PLANT GROUPS --**

[Nature's Way Resources](#) offers free guided tours of NWR's extensive nursery/soil/mulch enterprise to plant-oriented, organized groups. As usual, NWR's now-expanded meeting site is free to above groups. Reservations a must for both. Great time to visit!



- **GOOD NEWS FOR BUSY/LAZY GARDENERS:** Curbside pickup is now available in the [Nature's Way Resources](#) nursery, and we're offering plant preorders for special requests. Call in your order, pick it up when it works for you, or let us try to source the plants you're looking for on upcoming shipments. *Find inventory sheet [here](#).*
- **SUBMITTING A CALENDAR EVENT?** *For best chance of getting it in next upcoming newsletter, submit in exact requested format (see top of calendar below. Reformatting by us may = delay in publication)*

* * *

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*Brenda Beust Smith's column in the
LAZY GARDENER & FRIENDS HOUSTON GARDEN NEWSLETTER
is based on her 40+ years as the Houston Chronicle's Lazy Gardener
Email: lazygardenerbrenda@gmail.com*



John's Corner

NEWS FROM THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF SOIL AND PLANTS

This article has been condensed for clarity and ease of reading

Living Mulches: An Economical Way to Improve Soil

By John Ferguson

I was asked by several people how they could economically improve their soil on large acreages. One answer is to use what are known as living mulches.

Depending on the goal, these plants may also be called cover crops or green manures. The terms are sometimes used interchangeably because they serve many of the same purposes.

In general, living mulches are mowed and left on the soil surface or allowed to remain standing, while green manures are generally tilled into the soil. These practices are commonly used in agriculture, but they can also be useful anywhere large areas of soil need improvement.

Living mulches are showing greater promise as we learn more about natural systems. They can reduce erosion, increase beneficial insects and microbes, improve water infiltration, add organic matter, recycle nutrients, and improve

soil structure. For large areas such as orchards, vineyards, and hay fields, they can also be very cost-effective.

What Can a Living Mulch Do?

For example, an appropriate cover crop planted in late fall can:

- Keep the soil covered through winter
- Prevent erosion and soil compaction
- Control winter weeds
- Add significant amounts of organic matter
- Improve soil structure and tilth
- Store and recycle nutrients
- Increase water infiltration
- Reduce surface-water pollution
- Attract beneficial insects
- Help control certain pests
- Reduce some soil-borne pathogens
- Fix nitrogen when nitrogen-fixing species are used
- Increase soil productivity
-

New research has even shown that some cover crops, such as crimson clover, can reduce weed seed germination by 27% even after being incorporated into the soil. Interestingly, when the same amount of nitrogen was supplied through ammonium nitrate fertilizer instead, weed seed germination increased by 75%.

Penn State University has been researching living mulches since 1975, and newer research has also found that some living mulch systems can reduce frost damage to plants.

Building Organic Matter

Living plants can add tremendous amounts of organic matter to the soil. Studies have found that a grass cover crop can add more than a dry ton of organic matter per year simply from its roots. Under some conditions, this can exceed five tons per acre, with another one to two tons coming from leaves and stems above ground.

The roots also release compounds called root exudates, which feed and stimulate beneficial soil microbes. These microbes become another important part of the soil's organic matter and biological activity.

Living Mulches vs. Plastic

For years, many people have used living mulches successfully. Researchers at the USDA in Beltsville, Maryland, compared hairy vetch (*Vicia villosa*), a winter-hardy legume, with plastic mulch.

The vetch plots had a longer growing season and produced up to twice as many tomatoes. The growers using vetch also had an average 65% increase in profits compared with those using plastic.

Other crops that responded well to vetch mulch included melons, snap beans, peppers, and eggplants.

For southern gardens, crimson clover (*Trifolium incarnatum*) is another good option and also attracts beneficial insects.

Additional USDA research found higher tomato yields and higher nitrogen levels when living mulch was used instead of black plastic—even when twice as much fertilizer was used with the plastic system.

Research on snap beans found that yields from mixed annual winter legumes were comparable to those produced with synthetic fertilizer. Over three years, yields were higher than conventional tillage systems, while the living mulch system required no additional water, herbicide, fertilizer, or other treatment until mowing.

The researchers also observed little to no runoff or erosion.

Living Mulches and Soil Diseases

Living mulches can do more than feed the soil.

Research has found that certain plants can suppress soil-borne diseases. Sudan grass and sweet corn, for example, have been found to suppress pathogenic fungi such as *Verticillium* wilt.

Other cover crops, including Sudan grass, rapeseed, white mustard, Elbon rye, and canola, can suppress certain plant-parasitic nematodes. Some of these plants also produce natural chemicals that inhibit other plants, making them useful for weed management.

Marigolds (*Tagetes* species) have been shown to reduce populations of root-lesion nematodes within a few months, with effects lasting for several years. In one study, the seed cost was about half the cost of chemical fumigation.

Cover crops can also help protect water quality. Studies in California's Salinas Valley found that low-cost cover crop systems reduced soil nitrate leaching by 37–70% in intensive vegetable production without reducing yields.

Biofumigation: Nature's Soil Fumigant

Some living mulches and cover crops can also help control pathogens through a process known as biofumigation.

This is particularly well documented in members of the mustard family. As these plants grow, or as their tissues decompose, they release compounds that can inhibit or kill certain soil-borne pathogens.

Mustard-family plants contain compounds called glucosinolates. When plant tissue is damaged and these compounds interact with the enzyme myrosinase, they break down into several compounds, including isothiocyanates. Some of these compounds act much like natural soil fumigants.

Research has shown that these natural compounds can suppress certain pathogens, including *Phytophthora* and *Pythium*. In one study, incorporating

only 1% meadowfoam seed meal into a potting mix greatly stimulated the growth of conifer seedlings without suppressing mycorrhizal formation.

We are only beginning to understand the many ways plants and soil microbes interact to naturally protect the next crop.

Choosing and Using a Living Mulch

Living mulch is not appropriate for every situation.

It may not work well with short or shallow-rooted crops, plants that are sensitive to drought, or crops growing in very sandy or low-fertility soils where competition for water and nutrients becomes a problem.

When using living mulch in vegetable production, research suggests it is often best to wait until the primary crop is established before planting the cover crop. For many crops, planting about one-third of the way through the growing cycle works well.

Different living mulches also provide different benefits. Some improve water infiltration more than others. Coarser plant material may remain on the soil surface longer because it decomposes more slowly. Plants with tough, lignified stems tend to encourage fungal activity, while softer grasses decompose more quickly and tend to favor bacterial activity.

Living mulch can be planted much like any other seed. A loose, friable soil makes a good seedbed. On small areas, spreading the seed and lightly raking the soil can provide good seed-to-soil contact. For larger areas, follow standard agricultural practices appropriate for your location.

Some living mulches are best suited to winter, while others perform better during warm weather. In most situations, it is also best to mow before the plants produce seed unless the area is intentionally being left fallow.

Finally, remember that repeatedly planting the same species in the same location can increase the chance of certain diseases developing in the soil.

Rotating living mulches and using mixtures of species can help reduce this risk.

Your local Agricultural Extension office is often an excellent source of information about which cover crops are best suited to your soil and the appropriate time of year to plant them.

Living mulches are a simple example of working with nature rather than against it. Instead of leaving soil bare and then trying to rebuild it with purchased inputs, we can use plants, roots, microbes, and organic matter to continually improve the soil.

For large areas, that can be one of the most economical tools a landowner has.

[See original article here](#)

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If you're enjoying these deeper soil insights, there's another way to stay connected to what's happening on the ground at **Nature's Way Resources**.

Soil Source is our ongoing update from NWR - sharing what's in stock, seasonal specials, upcoming events, and timely soil and planting tips based on what we're seeing in real time at the nursery.

No spam. No soliciting. Just real updates, soil insights, and what's happening at Nature's Way Resources.

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LAZY GARDENER & FRIENDS HOUSTON GARDEN NEWSLETTER CALENDAR EVENTS

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-- ONLY GREATER HOUSTON AREA NONPROFIT GROUP EVENTS --

Expect delay if we must reformat: 3-LINE (max) EXACT FORMAT:

DAY, DATE: TITLE (by NAME *if talk*), time, site. Sponsor (*if not in title*).
website/phone (NOTE CAPITALS VS lower case)

- Gardening events ONLY! No harvest, cooking, arranging, etc.
- ONLY events sent SPECIFICALLY TO US FOR CALENDAR are used!
- NO events picked up from flyers -- NO PDFS! TYPE IN EMAIL ONLY.
- Don't add city unless not "Houston." (Don't add "Houston")
- Submit to: lazygardenerbrenda@gmail.com. Check published entry!

AUGUST

WED. AUG. 26: CACTUS AND SUCCULENTS TRIVIA NIGHT AND PLANT EXCHANGE, 7pm, Multi-purpose Metropolitan Center, 1475 W. Gray. Free, Houston Cactus and Succulent Society. hcsstex.com

SEPTEMBER

WED., SEP. 2: LEARN TO GROW PICKLES by ERIKA RUTZ, 10 – 11:30am, Visitor Center, Mercer Arboretum & Botanic Gardens, 22306 Aldine Westfield Rd. Free. pct3.com/MBG

SAT., SEP. 5: PLANT WALK & GARDEN TOUR - PLANTS THAT HAVE CHANGED THE WORLD by ZOE MATRANGA, 10-11am, Mercer Arboretum & Botanic Gardens, 22306 Aldine Westfield Rd. Free. pct3.com/MBG

FRI., SEP. 11: MERCER GARDEN TOUR by MERCER STAFF, 9-10am, Mercer Arboretum & Botanic Gardens, 22306 Aldine Westfield Rd. Free. pct3.com/MBG

SAT, SEPT 12: SEED HARVESTING by MONTGOMERY COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS, 9am-11am, Texas A&M Agrilife Extension, 9020 Airport Rd., Conroe 936-539-7824, mcmga.com

SAT., SEPT. 12: T-BUD GRAFTING by **GALVESTON COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS**, 9-11am. AgriLife Extension Bldg., Carbide Park, 4102-B Main Street (FM 519), La Marque. Free. <https://galveston.agrilife.org/events/>

SAT., SEPT. 12: GROWING STRAWBERRIES by **GALVESTON COUNTY MASTR GARDENERS**, 1-3pm. AgriLife Extension Bldg., Carbide Park, 4102-B Main Street (FM 519), La Marque. Free. Register: <https://galveston.agrilife.org/events/>

WED., SEP. 16: LUNCH & LEARN – BANANAS UNPEELED by **CHRISTY JONES & KELSEY WILLIAMS**, 12-2pm, Mercer Arboretum & Botanic Gardens, 22306 Aldine Westfield Rd. Free. pct3.com/MBG

SAT., SEPT. 19: FALL GARDEN FESTIVAL by **NATURE'S WAY RESOURCES**, 8AM-2PM, 101 Sherbrook Cir., Conroe. 936-273-1200. <https://www.natureswayresources.com/garden-events>

WED. SEPT. 23: PARASITIC PLANTS THAT ATTACK CACTUS AND EUPHORBIAS by **PROF. JIM MAUSETH**, 7pm. Multi-purpose Metropolitan Center, 1475 W. Gray. Free, Houston Cactus and Succulent Society. hcsstex.com

FRI. SEPT. 25, 9 am-5 pm, and SAT. SEPT 26, 9 am-3 pm. HOUSTON CACTUS AND SUCCULENTS' SOCIETY SHOW AND SALE. Multi-purpose Metropolitan Center, 1475 West Gray. Free admission and parking, Houston Cactus and Succulent Society www.hcsstex.com.

SAT. SEPTEMBER 26: GARDEN WALK: ESCAPE INTO THE GARDEN by **LEAGUE CITY GARDEN CLUB**, League City, 10-4 pm, Tickets \$20, www.leaguecitygardenclub.org.

OCTOBER

SAT., OCT. 3: PLANT WALK & GARDEN TOUR – SPOOKY PLANTS by **ZOE MATRANGA**, 10-11am, Mercer Arboretum & Botanic Gardens, 22306 Aldine Westfield Rd. Free. pct3.com/MBG

SAT, OCT 3: NEW HOMEOWNER LANDSCAPE BASICS by **MONTGOMERY COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS**, 9am-2PM, Texas A&M Agrilife Extension, 9020 Airport Rd., Conroe 936-539-7824, mcmga.com

FRI., OCT. 9: MERCER GARDEN TOUR by **MERCER STAFF**, 9-10am, Visitor Center, Mercer Arboretum & Botanic Gardens, 22306 Aldine Westfield Rd. Free. For more information: pct3.com/MBG

SAT, OCT 10: FALL PLANT SALE by **MONTGOMERY COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS**, 9am-noon, Texas A&M Agrilife Extension, 9020 Airport Rd., Conroe 936-539-7824, mcmga.com

THURS.-SAT, OCT. 8-10: 84TH BULB AND PLANT MART by **GARDEN CLUB OF HOUSTON**, Thurs., 5-7pm, Thurs; Fri. 9am-4pm, Sat. 9am-1pm

SAT., OCT 24: The BUTTERFLY & POLLINATOR FESTIVAL by **WALKER COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS**, 9am-noon. Texas A&M Agrilife Extension, 102 TAM Road, Huntsville, 936-435-2426, [link](#)

SAT., OCT. 24: POLLINATOR PLANT SALE., 8am-3pm, Mercer Arboretum & Botanic Gardens, 22306 Aldine Westfield Rd, Humble. Free. friendsofmercer.org, 713-274-4166

WED. OCT. 28: GROWING CACTUS & SUCCULENTS FROM SEED by **JACOB MARTIN**, 7 PM, Multi-purpose Metropolitan Center, 1475 West Gray. Free, Houston Cactus and Succulent Society. hcsstex.com

NOVEMBER

WEB. NOV 18: CACTUS AND SUCCULENT PLANTS - CONSIDERATIONS by **DAVE THOMAS**, 7PM, Multi-purpose Metropolitan Center, 1475 W. Gray. Free, Houston Cactus and Succulent Society. hcsstex.com

[See more](#)

*If your event didn't get in right away, probably was set aside to be rewritten in our exact, never-changing format (See top of calendar)!
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If we inspire you to attend any of these,
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About Us

BRENDA BEUST SMITH

WE KNOW HER BEST AS THE LAZY GARDENER . . .

but Brenda Beust Smith is also:

- * a national award-winning general feature 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-project to reporting -- John Ferguson called immediately (the next morning!) to ask if she'd continue publishing it for his **Nature's Way Resources**. Familiar with John's international reputation as a soil/mulch expert, she jumped at the opportunity and has been writing weekly for NWR ever since! The name, she says, is STILL not just fun, it's TRUE!

Brenda's gradual sideways step from general reporting into also doing gardening reporting 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 (lazygardenerbrenda@gmail.com)

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

For over three decades, Brenda served as Assistant 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 had 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.

About her column, Brenda says: "I don't consider myself a 'garden writer.'" I started out 50+ years ago as a very lazy "gardening reporter." I still feel that way today. I hope my columns inspire/help newcomers, but I do not write to them. I write to very experienced gardeners who want to expand their horizons.

JOHN FERGUSON -- *Founder, Mentor, and Friend (1951–2025)*

John was a native Houstonian and had over 35 years of business experience. He passed down Nature's Way Resources, a composting company that specializes in high-quality compost, mulch, and soil mixes, to his son Ian Ferguson. He held an MS degree in Physics and Geology and was a licensed Soil Scientist in Texas.

John won many awards in horticulture and environmental issues. For years, he represented 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 its products. He was 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, Nature's Way Resources contributes John's past articles and new information regularly and is responsible for publishing it.

SHELBY CASSANO

Shelby Cassano is the communications and marketing lead for Nature's Way Resources and the editor of The Lazy Gardener and Friends newsletter. Through her business, Leaf and Ledger, she exclusively partners with NWR to direct all marketing efforts, from strategy and planning to technical production of the newsletter. Shelby holds a B.S. in Agriculture with a concentration in Horticulture from Stephen F. Austin State University and previously managed the company's nursery.



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