

# SFA Gardens News

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## Notes from the Director

By David Creech

One of the things we do is trial plants. As a long ago horticulture student at Texas A&M University, I was trained with the mantra that new selections should be evaluated in many locations, over many years before introduction. That's no longer happening. I've concluded the current flood of new plant materials is bewildering. Dr. Charles Hall, Ellison Chair, Texas A&M University, has coined the phrase "hypercompetition" to describe the acceleration of branding, patenting and marketing of new plants as nurseries attempt to gain market share. Psychologists contend that more choices may lead to a poorer decision or a failure to make a decision at all. Hall has referred to this as a

kind of analysis paralysis, the process perhaps leading to rational ignorance (when the cost of educating oneself outweighs any potential benefits). Dilution may not be the solution. To add to the confusion, there's a relatively new trend to rebrand,

remarket and reintroduce varieties introduced long ago. To be honest, university and other plant trialing programs may not be as relevant to the nursery market place as they used to be. By the time a new variety succeeds or fails in trials, the



**Black Diamond™ Crimson Red crape myrtle in flower at the SFA Gardens**

industry has already made a major market push or totally left the scene with a newer, more exciting and more fashionable plant. For the consumer, it may not really matter one way or the other. To keep excitement high, perhaps we need to

offer 96 reblooming azaleas in the market place. Maybe ten major brands of reblooming Hydrangeas really is a good idea. Perhaps the industry will benefit from presenting customers with umpteen black leaf crape myrtle varieties.

In the short term, there are certainly profits to be made by nurserymen able to position themselves. In the long term, perhaps we are creating customers confused by the barrage of new plants. I've concluded there's no relief in sight, and perhaps the only course is simply to just sit back and enjoy the ride. After all, our mission at SFA Gardens remains the same: educate, evaluate, and enlighten. That we can do.

A good example of the avalanche of new varieties is crape myrtle. This \$50 million crop is a standard in the small tree world of the South. Right now, nothing has excited the crape myrtle industry more than dark burgundy foliage cultivars. Since the introduction of Cecil Pounders' *Lagerstroemia* Delta Jazz™

## Notes, cont.

(‘Chocolate Mocha’ PP 21,540) there have been 13 new varieties entering the market place with burgundy foliage that lasts throughout the season.

‘Chocolate Mocha’ features small flower heads of bubblegum pink, an upright stature to 10 feet, and leaves best described as dark, cupped and somewhat viral looking. In full sun, the variety is relatively free of disease, but in part shade conditions there can be significant powdery mildew. The genes of this cultivar led to five Black Diamond™ varieties introduced by JBerry Nursery, with flower colors ranging from red to white to blush. These five are trademarked but not patented.

Three more Black Diamond™ varieties are on the way in 2015, including ‘Shell Pink,’ ‘Majestic Magenta,’ and ‘Purely Purple.’ To confuse things a bit, there is the Ebony series of crape myrtles which are essentially the exact same plants as the Black Diamond crape myrtles, but under different names. Those were followed by the release of four dark-foliaged Delta™ varieties by PDSI in Loxley, Alabama. In addition, Dr. Michael A. Dirr, with Plant Introductions, Inc., has introduced two patented dark-foliaged varieties ‘Midnight Madness,’ ‘Moonlight Madness’ and ‘Twilight Madness.’ All of these are in trials at SFA Gardens.

Another example is redbuds. This outstanding native, a harbinger of spring, is experiencing the same avalanche of new varieties. In fact,



**‘Carolina Sweetheart’ Redbud with it’s colorful foliage at the Mountain Crops Experiment Station in North Carolina**

one of my friends asked me if redbuds are the new crape myrtle. The introduction of golden foliated varieties, ‘Hearts of Gold’ and ‘Rising Sun,’ excited everyone. There are improved maroon foliage varieties, ‘Merlot’ and ‘Ruby Falls,’ both out of Denny Werner’s North Carolina State University breeding program. ‘Alley Cat’ is an improved variegated version of ‘Silver Cloud.’ Most shocking is a brand new variety called ‘Carolina Sweetheart,’ which is patented and will only be sold in North Carolina for the first year before it is released nationwide. In July, I saw this tree first from a distance in Asheville, North Carolina, at the Mountain Crops Experiment Station. I asked

Tom Ranney, breeder extraordinaire, “Hey, what’s that tree with the bright pink flowers?” He smiled and said, “Well, Dave, those aren’t exactly flowers, those are leaves.” When we made our way there, I was stunned. This variegated beauty features the normal redbud spring flower show, but keeps on saying hello with the most brilliant foliage I’ve ever seen on a redbud. Tom was watching me closely and, while the temptation was great, I kept my snips in my holder. No budwood this time, but we’re on a mission to plant the first of this breakout variety at SFA Gardens in the coming year. Until then, we’ll keep planting.

**Visit [sfagardens@sfasu.edu](mailto:sfagardens@sfasu.edu) for a list of upcoming events!**

## Get ready for Azaleaphiles

By Barb Stump

We have another reason to get our azalea plantings tidied up this fall — March 26 through 29, approximately 100 serious azaleaphiles are coming. The national Azalea Society of America Convention is coming to enjoy our fair city and all the Garden Capital of Texas has to offer. That term “azaleaphile” is an old term the society founders used that means, literally, “azalea-lover.” We’re meeting in the Ina Brundrett Conservation Education Building and touring all the SFA Gardens, some private ones, as well as driving the Nacogdoches Azalea Trail route.

Let’s review fall azalea care so we can put on our best show next spring. It’s really fairly simple. Rule number one: no heavy pruning now. Our azaleas have been setting their

buds for next spring’s blooms while we’ve been enjoying our summers. If you prune branches now, there will be no blooms next spring. You may not think buds are there yet, but look carefully at the ends of the branches, and you will see tiny pointed buds sitting there. But, if you have dead branches, cut them to the ground. If the whole shrub is dead, dig it out. Consider a different site for a new azalea, with better soil, partial shade, and regular water schedule. If you have some branches that stick out very high over the main bush, you can trim them to match the rest of the shrub shape; however they will not bloom until next spring. Rule number two: a light fertilizing is OK around the drip line between September and the middle of October. The later

you fertilize, the greater the chance of having new growth burned by an early frost. At this point, you should wait to fertilize in early March, assuming freezing temperatures aren’t in the forecast. Rule number three: adding several inches of pine bark fines or pine straw mulch is always a good idea. The best news is that fall is the best time to plant azaleas. Plant in soil that is rich and loose—no rocky cliffs or sandy beaches—and keep watered until our winter rains come. Both you and our convention folks will love the results.

If you would like to volunteer to help with the convention, contact Barb Stump at [bstump@sfasu.edu](mailto:bstump@sfasu.edu) or 936-468-4129. Our convention volunteer coordinator Nancy Niehaus ([niehaus@suddenlink.net](mailto:niehaus@suddenlink.net)).

## Nacogdoches Naturally Family Fun Day Kick-Off a Success!

By Kerry Lemon

Nacogdoches Naturally Family Fun Day, held at the SFA Pineywoods Native Plant Center Saturday, Sept. 6, was a huge success with 51 families and approximately 150 people including staff and volunteers attending.

Taking the Outdoor Challenge, families were encouraged to visit activity stations. They included an observation bee hive, provided by the Pineywoods Beekeepers Association; birding activities, sponsored by the Pineywoods Audubon Society; geocaching led by John Boyette from Texas A&M Forest Service; archery; outdoor water games; backyard bass casting practice; garden activi-

ties; Leave No Trace activities; Dutch oven cooking; and a guided

SFA National Association of Interpreters.



nature hike. Activities for the day were presented by partner organizations, community volunteers, SFA staff, students and volunteers including representatives from the

Feedback from participating families was overwhelmingly positive. Many expressed appreciation for the opportunity to spend time outside with their children learning outdoor skills and gaining knowledge in areas such as local bird and plant identification, composting, outdoor cooking, and the principles and ethics of Leave No Trace.

The kick-off event highlights our outdoor programs for children and families, promoting connections with the natural world through weekend family outings, after-school programs, and other community environmental education events.

## Fall is for Planting

By Greg Grant

I've gardened for most of my 50 years and would need a boxcar to store all the lessons I've learned, most of them, the hard way. But you know what? Having done something wrong is often the best catalyst for remembering to do things right in the future. Any gardener that doesn't admit to making mistakes is probably no gardener at all.

I've learned that tulips, blue spruce and most other northern and European plants don't grow here. I've learned not to plant vegetables in the shade. I've learned that there's a huge difference in varieties and cultivars of plants. Some are just plain superior. I've learned to stop planting stuff in the pasture with my dad's plant killing cows and horses. But mostly what I've learned has to do with our predictably, unpredictable weather.

We all know there are four seasons. Winter is typically cool or cold and wet. Spring and fall are generally mild with somewhat adequate moisture. And summer is hot as heck and normally parched. Most, however, don't realize our seasons in Texas are different from those in the rest of the world.

In the north and in Europe, they have a very cold winter, a cool spring and fall, and a mild summer. This is something to remember if you are going to grow plants you've seen in other parts of the world. When it comes to temperatures, our winter is equivalent to their spring. Our spring and fall are equivalent to their summer. And they have no corresponding season for our blistering summer. That's why much of the plant material you

see Martha Stewart growing won't grow here. They simply bake to a crisp in our summer

As a gardener, one of the first things you have to learn and accept is what season a particular plant grows best in. Cool season plants like broccoli, pansies and columbines like to be planted in the fall, winter and early spring. Warm season plants like tomatoes, zinnias and gaura like to be planted in the spring. And heat loving tropical plants like okra, castor beans and firebush like to be planted in the summer. Notice I didn't mention any woody plants?



**SFA Gardens technicians Brock Vinson and Duke Pittman, plant crape myrtles in late October**

When it comes to planting trees and shrubs, write this down and NEVER forget it — fall is best; winter is next best; spring is third best; and summer is the worst. Now, why would fall be better than spring? Plants planted during the spring and summer often succumb

to drought during our usually dry summers. Those planted during the fall and winter, however, usually survive. This is because of two factors. One, we normally get beneficial rains during the fall, winter and spring allowing the plants to get established without the aid of precious supplemental irrigation. And, two, we have mild enough winters in Texas that plants can actually grow roots that will help support them during their first bout with a mean and testy Lone Star summer.

This rule applies to all hardy trees, shrubs and vines. Fall truly is the best time. All spring-blooming perennials perform best when planted in the fall, as well. This would include native columbines, ox-eye daisy, perennial dianthus, yarrow, Louisiana iris, jonquils, narcissus and daffodils, to name a few. Of course, our cool-season, spring-blooming annuals like pansies, dianthus and ornamental cabbage and kale are best planted in the fall. This allows them the full benefit of their ideal temperatures before they die in the ensuing heat of summer.

Fall is not just for ornamentals either. Since it's literally our second spring, we get to plant whole new vegetable gardens, as well. We're capable of producing a new crop of warm season vegetables like tomatoes, squash and beans, as well as the traditional cool season favorites like cabbage, Swiss chard and cauliflower.

So there you have it. If I had to name THE most important gardening lesson I've learned in life, it would be that every plant has its season. And in Texas, that season is most likely fall.

## A Trail to Trials

By Jared Barnes

Hello everyone! Before I start my first contribution to the SFA Gardens newsletter, I'd like to introduce myself. I'm Jared Barnes, the new assistant professor of horticulture here at SFA. I'm thrilled to be here in such a horticulturally-rich part of Texas and the south (I am a southern boy after all). If I've already met you, thanks for making me feel welcomed, and if I haven't, I look forward to when our paths cross!

I learned a very important lesson about gardening several years ago from my friend Jason Reeves, curator of UT-Gardens Jackson in Jackson, Tennessee: "You don't know it till you grow it." And, it's so true! We can quickly share with friends our favorite plant that has thrived year after year, and we've all been let down by that impulse purchase that died three weeks later. Those words have stuck with me over the years, so much so that I really embrace the concept of trialing plants to learn as much as possible about them. Back in Raleigh, North Carolina, I had around 75 to 100 containers on my patio each year to trial. And, now that I'm a new horticulture professor at SFA, I'm hoping to take trialing to new heights.

What are the benefits of plant trials you might be asking? Trials of edible and ornamental plants are important to understand how various taxa perform in different areas and regions of the United States. Currently, most trial gardens focus on new plant introductions, but new cultivars may or may not be better than older counterparts! Just like a few (ok, a lot) of oldies

hits out there, some plants introduced way back when still can make gardeners groove because they are truly superior cultivars. Instead of focusing on recently-introduced cultivars, a few trial gardens such as the Chicago Botanic Garden in Glencoe, Illinois, and Mt. Cuba Center in Hockessin, Delaware, focus instead on the evaluation of cultivars introduced within a genus to compare recent and older introductions. For example, both gardens have conducted coneflower trials (*Echinacea* sp.) to determine which species and cultivars perform the best for those regions. The data these trials collected is very beneficial to all aspects of horticulture because they are comparing very similar taxa. However, these sites are located further north, and their data is not always applicable to the southeast and southern plains region.



**SFA horticulture students plant Swiss chard trials**

So, what plants will we trial? The concept of trials at SFA Gardens isn't new. Dr. Creech and staff have been evaluating countless plants for many years. But, what is new is to focus on a research-based trial for two types herbaceous plants—the edibles and the ornamentals. Edible plant trials are largely unexplored in the southeast, and I want to investigate how well cool-season crops such as Swiss chard (*Beta vulgaris*), kale (*Brassica oleracea*), spinach (*Spinacia oleracea*), beets (*Beta vulgaris*), and other cool-season vegetables survive the winter when compared with and without simple covers. Gardening during the darker and colder months of the year has been a passion of mine for years, because I love the concept of year-round gardening. And, recent interest in growing edible plants has increased the number of edibles on the market, and breeders are selecting for plants that cannot only be eaten but also provide ornamental value, as well! We chose to evaluate Swiss chard this fall because it is both edible and ornamental.

The second niche I want the trial gardens to focus on is evaluating the winter hardiness and performance of tender ornamental plants that thrive in the southeast. Dawn and I have had many conversations about how zone 8 plants and southern horticulture are underrepresented, and we hope that with these trials we can help to expand use, interest and appreciation of these plants. Our location here in East Texas also gives us the bonus that for many of these plants such as elephant ears

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## Texas Parks and Wildlife Co-op Grant Reconnects Children with Nature

By Elyce Rodewald

SFA Gardens was one of 22 organizations across the state receiving Texas Parks and Wildlife Department community outdoor outreach grants to help in the efforts to get Texas children back in touch with nature.

"This grant program was designed to introduce non-traditional constituents to nature-based programs, as well as increase environmental stewardship," says TPWD Co-op program director Darlene Lewis. "We'll be able to serve nearly 12,500 participants with these awards."



Grantees include; cities, non-profits, school districts and entire communities with one thing in common, a focus on natural and cultural resources and developing future stewards of the environment. Participants may have the opportunity to attend nature day camps and take part in outdoor recreation programs, as well as help with service projects.

The grant awarded in August will provide programming funds for

Nacogdoches Naturally, a project that offers outdoor education and recreation programming for underserved populations in the Nacogdoches area. Proposed programs for at-risk youth include after-school activities, in-school archery instruction, summer day camp, weekend outings and a nature photography workshop. The project, sponsored by SFA Gardens, relies on partnerships with resource professionals, community volunteers and SFA students to provide enriching outdoor education experiences to participants from the Nacogdoches Boys and Girls Club, Mike Moses Middle School, and the Solid Foundation, a nonprofit mentoring program for at-risk youth.

We want our participants to develop a lifetime enjoyment of outdoor recreation activities and a lifetime commitment to a land conservation ethic. Activities are designed to cultivate outdoor skills, increase knowledge of careers in natural resource fields and build awareness of outdoor education and recreation resources in East Texas. Participants will have the opportunity to:

- Develop skills in outdoor safety, Leave No Trace principles, hiking, bird watching, plant and animal identification, fishing, outdoor cooking, archery, canoeing, nature photography and orienteering;
- Contribute to a participant-driven service project;
- Visit natural areas in the Nacogdoches area; and
- Interact with and learn from natural resource professionals.



The SFA Gardens currently has a successful environmental education program for all ages with more than 17,000 students and adults participating. Participants in the current Nacogdoches Naturally program, which started in 2009 with a Co-op grant, have specifically requested the continuation and expansion of the after-school program. In addition, the evaluation completed at the close of the previous grant period clearly documented the success and benefit of these programs and justifies their continuation and expansion. This project is designed to provide long-term, in-depth training to a core group who will have the opportunity to develop lifelong outdoor skills and interests. We envision students building stronger bonds with each other, their families, their community and with the natural world. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Co-op Grant will provide essential support to continue the development and implementation of these programs.

## A True Agricultural Legacy

By Barb Stump

Thanks to a fine gift by Barbara Finney, Jimmy Hinds' daughter, the Jimmy Hinds Park on East Austin Street is going to be bigger and better than ever. Several projects are underway to improve accessibility for people and interpretation of plant collections as well as link the garden to the LaNana Creek Trail and the rest of the SFA Gardens. This legacy reaches back to the very first days of SFA.

In 1923, SFA's first president A. W. Birdwell asked J.H. Hinds to establish an Agriculture Department at the new college, "...as a service to the East Texas farmer, as well as training for future farmers." Since Hinds believed in practical experience first and foremost, he taught his students with hands-on projects around his family home on Raguet Street. Before there was the SFA Beef Farm, Poultry Science facilities, or the SFA Gardens, his students first learned to grow and care for crops, chickens, horses, cows and hogs on his own 22 acres, just north of campus. He spearheaded the ef-



**J.H. Hinds, M.S.— Professor of Agriculture and founder of the agricul-**

fort to get the "Experimental Farm House" on campus set aside for farm management and administration. He pioneered the chicken industry in East Texas, as well as landscape plant identification classes, a collection of specimen plants to broaden students' plant horizons, taught orchard work in grafting, budding and pruning, and began an experimental pasture so students

could work with and evaluate different kinds of forage grasses. Our agricultural roots at SFA truly came from Jimmy Hinds' vision and hard work. The park is part of the PNPC property and was given to SFA by the Hinds family in 2007.

Current plant collections include a unique *Hymenocallis* lirisome (spider lily) colony and a variety of heat- and water-tolerant baldcypress. Future plans include: removing invasive weed trees (such as Chinese tallow) to create sunny patches; planting Texas-adapted mixed wildflowers on the berm along Austin Street; installing several benches to provide resting spots for visitors; and creating an interpretive sign to tell all who visit about Jimmy Hinds, a giant of a man in East Texas agriculture.

At the moment, the main way you might know the Jimmy Hinds Park is by the "treehenge" of weeping baldcypress trees planted in a ring just east of the SFA Technical Support Center on East Austin Street.

## Trials, cont.



(*Colocasia*), passionflower (*Passiflora*), hardy ginger (*Cucurma*), ginger lily (*Hedychium*), and African lily (*Agapanthus*), many northern trial locations struggle overwintering these ornamental herbaceous plants. Another plus is that currently no large university trial has been conducted for these species in the southeastern U.S.

I chose to focus on these two groups because the ornamental plants can be evaluated from April

through November, and the edible plants can be evaluated from November through March. Thus, I'll always have something to do in the garden. (Ha! As if I don't already!) Additionally, with my teaching appointment, I see the opportunity to teach students about the importance of trialing plants and about the best plants for Texas landscapes as well as the southeast to prepare the next generation of horticulturists to grow it and know it.



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**Come grow with us!**

## **Student Profile: Jordan McGee** **By Dawn Stover**

Jordan McGee is an SFA graduating senior from Waxahachie, Texas. She has had her hands in the dirt for all of her life, following in the green thumbprints of her grandmother and her father. They encouraged her to pursue a degree in horticulture. Jordan decided to attend SFA because of how excited the faculty was about horticulture education and, of course, the beautiful SFA Gardens! She has loved every second of her experience at SFA. Her favorite plant is kale, and her favorite class is plant propagation. At SFA, Jordan was able to practice her skills growing plants on her own in a raised bed. It was a very valuable hands-on experience that gave her confidence and more insight into the field. Horticulture is a very practical field to her. "We need horticulture," she said. "It's a science, an art, and a part of life!" She recently completed a summer horticultural internship with Disney World in Florida and, upon graduation, wants to pursue a career in public garden education. On campus, Jordan is a member of the Sustainability Club, the Wesley Foundation, and is an officer in the SFA Horticulture Club.

