Monthly Horticulture Newsletter - July 2026

West Texas Gardening

"It is difficult to think anything but pleasant thoughts while eating a homegrown tomato."
-Lewis Grizzard

In This Issue

HOWDY!

Dear Readers,

It's harvesting time! and many of our gardens are gifting us with lots of great fruits and vegetables, then this advice on harvesting, handling, and storing your goodies might be for you!

Happy Gardening,

Sara Moran
Horticulture County Extension Agent
Ector & Midland Counties

TEXAS A&M AGRILIFE EXTENSION

HARVESTING, HANDLING, AND STORING VEGETABLES

JOSEPH MASABNI, PH.D., ASSISTANT PROFESSOR AND EXTENSION HORTICULTURIST AT THE TEXAS A&M AGRILIFE RESEARCH AND EXTENSION CENTER IN DALLAS, TX.

To help ensure that the vegetables you grow and prepare are of high quality, you need to harvest them at peak maturity, handle them properly, and store them under optimum conditions. Vegetables continue their life processes even after they are picked. If the vegetables are mature at harvest, their life processes need to be slowed by chilling. If they are immature produce such as green tomatoes, store them at room temperature to enhance the ripening process. Except for ripening, storage does not improve a vegetable's quality.

To be acceptable, a vegetable must be cultivated properly and of good quality at harvest. It can be difficult to determine when vegetables reach peak quality. The first step is to keep a record of the cultivars planted and the dates they were planted.

Although some vegetables are more prone to damage during harvesting than others, avoid bruises and cuts in handling all produce. Discard any vegetables with signs of decay or rot to prevent them from affecting the good produce. Some vegetables should be washed in cold running water immediately after they are harvested to remove any soil, dust, or other contaminants and to help lower their temperature.

Three keys to protecting the quality of your produce after harvest are temperature, moisture, and ventilation.

1. Temperature: For produce such as peas and sweet corn, the conversion of sugar to starch is critical to interrupt at harvest. To minimize this conversion, the produce must be cooled immediately. If possible, harvest these vegetables early in the morning or right before you intend to use them.
2. Moisture: The proper humidity level for storage varies by commodity. Leafy-type vegetables require a high humidity of about 95 percent; in contrast, onions can be stored in drier conditions, such as 65 to 70 percent relative humidity.
3. Ventilation: Minimize wilting and tissue breakdown by ensuring that air can circulate properly.

Here are recommendations to harvest and store the most popular summer vegetables:

- **Corn-sweet:** Watch corn for signs of ripeness for earliest harvest. Corn silks darken and dry out as the ears mature. As the kernels fill out toward the top, the ends become more rounded instead of pointed. Pick sweet corn in the milk stage, when a milklike juice exudes from the kernels if crushed with a thumbnail. Because sweet corn converts from sugar to starch very rapidly, cook, eat, or chill it immediately after harvest.
- **Cucumbers:** Harvest them when fruits are bright, firm, and green and before they get too large. A rule of thumb: harvest sweet pickles at 1½ to 2 inches long; harvest dills when they are 3 to 4 inches long, bright green, and less crisp. Avoid yellowed cucumbers. You can store cucumbers in the refrigerator 5 days. Do not try to pickle salad-type cucumbers.
- **Melons-honeydew:** Harvest honeydew when it is yellowish to creamy white with a soft, velvety feel. The rind should be slightly soft at the blossom end and have a faint, pleasant odor.
- **Melons-watermelon:** Harvest watermelon when the fruits are full size and have a dull surface and a cream-colored ground spot. Okra: For optimum quality, harvest okra that is 3 to 4 inches long. Harvest the pods before they reach the hollow, puffy stage and while they are easy to break or cut from stalk. For continued harvest, pick okra every day or two. Chill the harvested okra immediately.
- **Peppers:** Harvest bell peppers when they are 4 to 5 inches long and have full, well-formed lobes. Immature peppers are pale, soft, pliable, and thin fleshed. Harvest jalapeños when they are 2 to 2½ inches long. Mature peppers turn orange or red; this does not mean that they are hotter. Store harvested peppers at 45 to 50 degrees F.
- **Squash:** Harvest squash when it is 4 to 6 inches long for yellow crookneck squash, 6 to 8 inches long for yellow straight neck, and 3 to 4 inches in diameter for white scallop. A glossy color indicates tenderness. Harvest winter squash when the fruits are full size. The rind is firm and glossy and bottom (portion touching soil) of fruit is cream to orange colored. Light frost will not damage mature fruit. Because squash, like cucumbers, are susceptible to chilling injury, do not store them at cold temperatures for more than 2 to 3 days.
- **Tomatoes:** Harvest tomatoes when they are fully colored but still firm. Harvest red tomatoes for eating fresh, cooking, or canning. Do not can overripe tomatoes! If necessary, pick mature green or slightly pink tomatoes and ripen them at room temperature, out of direct sunlight.

Read complete article here

Know Your insect

Swallowtail caterpillars are the young stage of swallowtail butterflies. They feed on host plants such as parsley, dill, fennel, and some native plants.

Their unique colors and patterns help protect them from predators. When disturbed, they release a harmless but unpleasant odor as a defense mechanism. Some species resemble bird droppings in their early stages, an effective camouflage that helps protect them from predators.

Growing host plants in your garden helps support these beautiful butterflies and other beneficial pollinators.

Plant Spotlight

MEXICAN HAT

Mexican Hat (*Ratibida columnifera*) flower is a colorful, drought-tolerant wildflower that thrives in hot, dry climates. Its distinctive red and yellow petals droop from a tall central cone, giving it its unique sombrero-like appearance. This native plant attracts butterflies, bees, and other pollinators throughout its long blooming season.

Mexican hat is easy to grow and requires little maintenance once established. It is an excellent choice for water-wise and pollinator-friendly gardens.

I might have an Answer

What is this insect? is it going to kill my tree? *Mrs. R.*

Fortunately, this resident provided pictures! The suspect?... a leaffooted bug!

According to the Field Guide to Common Texas Insect from Texas A&M AgriLife Extension, leaffooted bug adults are about 3/4 inch in length and are dark brown with a whitish to yellowish stripe across the central part of the back. The hind legs have flattened, leaf-like expansions on the tibia. Nymphal stages look similar to adults except that they do not have fully developed wings.

Leaffooted bugs feed on a wide variety of developing fruit, seeds, stems and tender leaves of plants. Damage produce has a pale color.

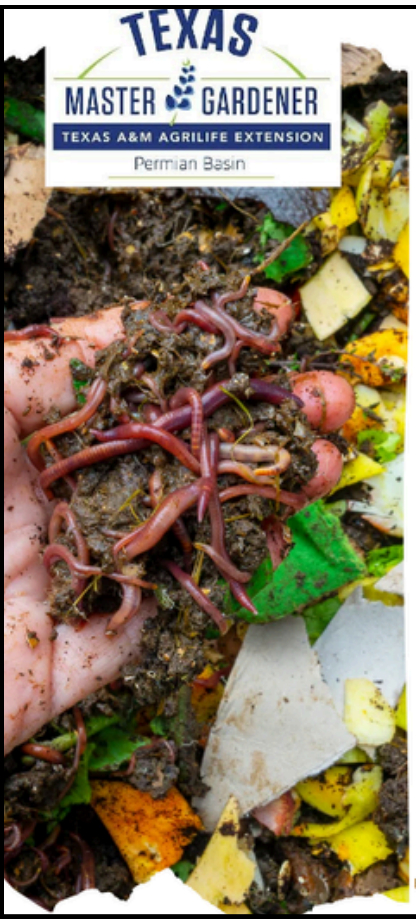
Leaffooted bugs visit my Desert Willow (*Chilopsis linearis*) tree almost every year. Yes, they are annoying but they do not cause major damage. They appeared when the tree is setting seed pods. When crushed they produce a distinctive (a nice word for 'yucky') odor.

Eliminating the nymphs is easier than the adults. The adults can fly. Use a hand vacuum or simply squash them. Regular scouting is crucial to keep the population under control. There are some insecticides label to use on leaffooted bug. Application is more effective on nymphal than on adults. ALWAYS read and follow label directions and information when using chemicals.

Leaffooted bug, Leptoglossus phyllopus, (Hemiptera: Coreidae), nymph on tomato plant.
Photo by Jackma
https://texasinsects.tamu.edu/leaffooted-bug/

A leaffooted bug, Narnia sp. (Hemiptera: Coreidae), on prickly pear cactus.
Photo by Drees.
https://texasinsects.tamu.edu/leaffooted-bug/

UPCOMING EVENTS



TEXAS MASTER GARDENER
TEXAS A&M AGRILIFE EXTENSION
Permian Basin

Simple Home VERMICULTURE

Hands on activity to include creating your very own worm bin and learning how to maintain and harvest the castings. You will leave with everything you need to get started

Speaker:
Suellen King, Permian Basin Master Gardener

Saturday, July 25, 2026
9:00 am - 11:00 am
Midland Lee High School Library
3500 Neely Ave. Midland, TX 79707

$25
Per person.
Limited spots available!

REGISTER HERE

Extension programs serve people of all ages regardless of socioeconomic level, race, color, sex, religion, disability, or national origin. The Texas A&M System, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the County Commissioner's Courts of Texas Cooperating.

MORE Classes & Events

TEXAS A&M AGRILIFE EXTENSION

Lawn Care Webinar

Each webinar series from **6:00 - 7:30 pm** (CST)

Learn the essentials of maintaining a healthy, attractive lawn in the challenging West Texas climate. This three-part online webinar series will cover selecting the right turfgrass, establishing and maintaining a water-efficient lawn, and identifying and managing common weeds.

- **August 4, 2026:** Choosing and Establishing Lawn for West Texas
- **August 5, 2026:** Seasonal Lawn Maintenance
- **August 6, 2026:** Weed Management in the Lawn

SPEAKERS:

Joey Young, Ph.D.,
Associate Professor of Turfgrass Science, Texas Tech University

Leslie Beck, Ph.D.,
Associate Professor, Extension Weed Specialist, New Mexico State University

$15 per person

REGISTER TODAY!

www.westtexasgardening.org/classes

IMPORTANT NOTES:
- Price is per person.
- You will receive an email with a ZOOM link to join the webinar on August 3, 2026.
- Recorded videos will be available ONLY to those that register from August 12 - October 12, 2026.

WORD SEARCH

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t	u	d	p	q	i	u	g	h	w
o	c	m	a	l	p	m	k	a	a
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g	a	c	a	r	e	n	i	o	p
l	v	m	t	i	u	n	g	t	s
m	o	d	f	s	x	u	x	h	s
t	a	p	e	p	p	e	r	j	r

Tomato
Pepper

Harvest
Storing

Insect
Flower

EDITORS & CONTRIBUTORS

Sara A. Moran serves as the County Horticulture Extension Agent in Midland and Ector counties in Texas. She graduated from New Mexico State University with a Master's Degree in Horticulture. Her main focus is Urban Gardens.
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