

West Texas Gardening

*"Never lose an opportunity of seeing
anything beautiful"*
– Charles Kingsley

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HOWDY!



Dear Readers,

Did you get to enjoy some snow this last month?. Snow and cold temperatures are not everyone's favorite weather, however, they can bring a serene and quiet atmosphere in our gardens. Our plants also serve as shelters and food for our little garden friends, those that we can see and the ones we do not see. Every season has its own beauty.

Happy Gardening,

Sara Moran
Horticulture County Extension Agent
Ector & Midland Counties

TEXAS A&M
AGRILIFE
EXTENSION

THE IMPORTANCE OF WINTER

BY EMMY ULMSCHNEIDER, PERMIAN BASIN MASTER GARDENER



Photo by Emmy Ulmschneider

The last few days gave us our first taste of winter complete with snow and cold temperatures. I covered most of my edible fruit trees and vegetables, but left my native landscape plants, principally prairie forbs and grasses to deal with winter on their own. Natives “know” how to survive! To us, winter seems to be a down time but in our native plant landscapes the opposite is true. Our winter maintenance affects the beauty and resilience of our native landscape throughout the year. So, what happens in a native winter landscape and what is our role? Although we can see the above ground winter vegetation, most of the action is out of sight in the soils. To an untrained eye, native plant winter landscapes may seem weedy or unkempt, but if you look closely, you can find great beauty.

[To find out more about the native plants in our shortgrass prairie for our area click here or scan the QR Code](#)



Native plant landscapes are active year-round. Undisturbed, our deep prairie soils have an open soil structure, large amounts of organic matter, and a wide variety of soil microbes. All of which support the deep root systems of our native prairie plants. Unseen, soil microbes are busy year-round and winter is no exception. Just like our gut microbes, soil microbes are the heavy lifters for breaking down organic matter which supports their ecosystems.

Unlike many of our non-native landscape plants, deep native plant root systems and their associated soil microbes are active in winter; roots store nutrients giving the plants energy for winter activity and a boost for early spring growth. It is no wonder that prairie soils underlie some of our most productive agricultural lands.

Although our winter air temperatures fluctuate widely, soil temperatures do not. Since the roots of prairie plants are active year-round, providing extra insulation with appropriate mulch helps keep roots active. Mulch also retains soil moisture and releases nutrients as it decomposes. Mulch your soil in thin layers with appropriate mulch. What is appropriate mulch? For our native prairie plants, principally forbs and grasses, chopped up plant material is perfect. Keep your wood chips and tree leaves for mulch under your landscape trees. Your native landscape can provide you with the perfect appropriate material



Photos by Emmy Ulmschneider

When you take down your native beds in late winter, clip up the thick stem material into small pieces and leave it on the ground. Likewise, throughout the growing season, when you trim back spent flowerheads, clip them up and return them to the soil. There, this organic material can replenish the soil nutrients. No need to “waste” this material in the dumpster.

Want to use your native winter landscape to support our wildlife and beneficial insects? Leave your native vegetation standing throughout the winter, to provide a rich food source for animal life in your garden. Long after the plants have stopped photosynthesizing, the seedheads are a rich source of food for finches, sparrows, cardinals, and doves. If they fall over in the wind, bundle several stalks together and tie them to a post or stake. In my native landscape Mexican Hat, *Ratibida columnifera*, Annual Sunflowers, *Helianthus annuus*, asters, *Symphyotrichum* ssp. and goldenrods, *Solidago* ssp. are particularly attractive. Native grasses such as Sideoats Grama, *Bouteloua curtipendula*, Inland Sea Oats, *Chasmanthium latifolium* and Plains Bristle Grass, *Setaria leucopila*, are high protein food sources and some of the first to be eaten. A winter landscape also provides cover for overwintering wildlife. Leaving a foot of hollow stem standing in the ground will provide native bees and other insects with a place to nest. I find them often in the spring, emerging from the larger hollow stems of sunflowers and Frostweed, *Verbesina virginica*. You can also provide more cover and shelter with rock walls or brush piles. Be slow in taking down your garden and remember to use that spent vegetative material as mulch.

And finally, with a new perspective on winter, think of winter not as a time of rest but as an active part of your gardening year. Observe your native landscape for both the wildlife benefit and human enjoyment perspective. How does your native landscape bring you joy? Look for the beauty of shapes, colors, and texture. Uncover the hidden beauty in a winter landscape, you'll be glad you did!.

[For more information, although in a different ecosystem click here](#) or scan the QR Code



Know Your insect

Assassin bugs are considered beneficial insects because they prey on other insects and thus help keep their numbers in check. It is nature's way of maintaining balance. Assassin bugs are generalist predators and will eat whatever comes along including other beneficial insects. I believe this assassin bug is a Leafhopper Assassin Bug (*Zelus renardii*). Assassin bugs belong to the Order Hemiptera or true bugs. Hemiptera means half wing and refers to the fact that the upper portion of the wing is leathery and the lower portion membranous. True bugs have piercing / sucking mouthparts.

*Article and Picture y John Cappadonna,
Permian Basin Master Gardener*



Plant Spotlight



MEXICAN MINT MARIGOLD

Mexican Mint Marigold (*Tagetes Lucida*) is a long cultivated herb which readily doubles as a showy late season ornamental herbaceous perennial. New growth is spring green maturing to dark green and contrasts handsomely with the three-quarters to one inch diameter bright yellow to orange-yellow composite flowers. Although flowering can occur whenever growth conditions permit, peak flowering is often associated with the shorter days of late summer and autumn.

*Article and Picture y John Cappadonna,
Permian Basin Master Gardener*

I might have an Answer

The severe cold the last few nights has caused many of the leaves of non-native agaves in my yard to fold over. We probably need to wait until it warms up to see if those leaves will remain viable or whether they'll stand up again. Aside from the cold, though, these plants have thrived in my yards in west Texas.. even in other years where the temps have gotten down to 9 degrees F. I'm wondering if you have any thoughts on what will happen to them, or whether I should cut these leaves off and see what happens to the remaining plants?

Bob K.

This one is easy, short answer: "Do nothing and give it time"...The End... for the long answer keep reading...

Big advise: Be patient, do not rush to cut damage leaves. They might look awful, but they actually help protect healthy tissue, normally growing at the base. Instead, remove snow or ice gently, so leaves won't break. After a snow event, the soil will be moist. No need to water. Too much water could cause the root to rot. Hold off pruning until temperature warm up or around spring time. However if the leaves or the branch is a hazard, then prune immediately. Pruning in spring will allow you to see what is dead or just damage. Again, be patient, because if you have to remove some leaves, plant aesthetic might be compromise and you might need some time to get use to its new 'look'. For Agaves, trim leaves back to firm tissue or to the base.

When possible, protect your plants from repeat freezes with frost cloth or mulch. Mulch will help to stabilize soil temperature, 2-4 inch layer should work.

Avoid fertilizers. Fertilizer will push new growth too soon. Fertilizer will misdirected plant's energy into growing new tissue. At this point the plant is trying to recover. New growth is vulnerable to the next cold snap.

Bottom line, be patient. Nature is design to figure things out. If the outcome is not what you want, take it as an opportunity to plant a fresh start.



Photo by Bob K.



UPCOMING EVENTS



Landscape School

FOUR days full of information that will help you design or re-design a mindful landscape focusing on water conservation, wildlife, and pollinators

9:00 am - 12:30 pm

Midland County Extension Office
2445 E. Hwy 80 Midland, TX 79706

February 14: Soil Basics & Irrigation

March 14: Water Conservation and Native Habitat Principles

March 28: Review & One-hour consultation

May 2: Field Day to Watersong Wild Space!

\$45

Per person. Limited spots available!
Includes soil analyses

REGISTER HERE

Questions? Sara Moran
432-686-4700



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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.

2026 Lunch & Learn Series

Marvelous Microgreens and Stupendous Sprouts

Learn how to grow fresh, nutrient-dense microgreens and sprouts at home. We will learn about growing methods, basic care, and more! for successful growing microgreens and sprouts!

Speaker: Cindy Olive
Permian Basin Master Gardener

Tuesday, February 17, 2026

12:00 - 1:00 pm

2445 E. Hwy 80 Midland TX, 79706

FREE!

REGISTRATION REQUIRED!



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.



Tree Care Workshop Series

TREE PRUNING BASICS

This short course provides an introduction to pruning techniques for ornamental and fruit trees. Learn how to get started and what NOT to do! Includes hands-on activity (weather permitting)

Speaker: Dr. Marisa Thompson
Urban Horticulture Specialist from New Mexico State University Extension

Saturday, February 21, 2026

Midland County Extension Office
2445 E. Hwy 80 Midland, TX 79706

Agenda:

9:00 - 11:00 am: Tree Pruning Basics
11:30 am - 12:30 pm: Hands-on at a local Garden

\$10

Per person.
Limited spots available!

REGISTER HERE

Questions? Sara Moran
432-686-4700



NM STATE
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Integrated Pest Management

Learn how to control insects and weeds in the garden and landscape using a minimum of pesticides.

Sponsored by:

The West Texas Food Bank

Location:

Midland Campus of the West Texas Food Bank.

1601 Westcliff Drive, Midland, TX

From 10:00AM until 12:00PM

Saturday - February 21, 2026

No cost - No registration required

All it takes is a little of your time.

More Classes & Events



WORD SEARCH

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

Freeze

Patience

Mulch

Protection

Agave

Marigold

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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THANK YOU!

Joshua Maranon, for your help and patience creating this newsletter!