



Grow, Know, and Go

January 2024

Gardening in North Texas

How to Help Beneficial Insects Survive Winter: Keep Them Snug as a Bug in a Natural Rug

By Susan Himes, Writer and Media Relations Specialist for Texas A&M AgriLife

While a decrease in insects as the weather cools sounds like a plus to many people, Texans should keep in mind that we need beneficial insects in gardens and yards. Protecting these insects through the colder months not only helps our own gardens, but also supports agriculture in our area, which benefits everyone.

“Although many insects die off in the colder months, some hibernate while others are still active as needed,” says Sonja Swiger, Ph.D., Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service entomologist and professor of Entomology at the Texas A&M College of Agriculture and Life Sciences in Stephenville. Some insects have it harder than others depending on where they are in Texas. Some also migrate south to locations where the climate is typically milder. Whether you do a little or a lot, protecting beneficial insects benefits all Texans.



Dr. Swiger shared five ways that Texans can help beneficial insects stay safe and survive the winter months:



Keep Some Weeds and Overgrowth

While preparing for late autumn and winter, you may be tempted to eliminate weeds and prune back as many plants as you can. Don't give in to temptation. Weeds, perennials and grasses provide shelter for beneficial bugs in the winter. If you've already started to prune, pile up your cuttings in a corner of the yard or garden. That allows it to compost over the winter while also providing insects a home. Some beneficial insects, including bees and wasps, need the hollow stalks and stems of plants to lay their eggs. Keeping some

weeds around as well as planting perennials can essentially create an insect nursery. And when overwintering eggs, nymphs or larvae, and pupae hatch in the spring, you have a built-in flourishing insect population.

Plant for pollinators

Winter can be a marathon for some pollinators. By planting cold-weather plants and trees that bloom later in the season, you can provide a food source to keep bees and other pollinator insects going through the chillier months. Regions where winters are on the milder side may see bees outside the hive more frequently. By having an all-season pollinator garden, you can provide them with the energy they need to get through the winter. They will then be ready to race to pollinate once temperatures warm.



Give 'Em Shelter

While some bees and wasps live in hives or nests, keep in mind that more often than not they are ground nesters. These pollinators will need some loose soil and leaf litter to get through the winter. "For those hive-dwelling pollinators, keep an eye out for their homes so you can put a plan in place to protect and shelter them," Dr. Swiger says. "Walk around your property and look in eaves and sheds." You don't want to enclose where they are, you just want to provide some protection from the elements."

Either purchase or make "insect hotels." These can be anything from what would serve the function of a traditional hive to those designed for the pollinators who prefer no roommates. Ladybugs will look for crevices and somewhere with moisture when they need to hibernate for the winter. They cannot survive freezing temperatures, which means that under tree bark, a dark garden crevice or your home can all be attractive options for them.

Leave the Leaves, Please

Leaves make a great compost ground cover for beneficial insects and their different life stages. Composting leaves from trees such as oaks will not only prepare your beds for spring, but leaves also provide sustenance and protection for helpful insects now. "Leaving 1 or 2 inches of leaf litter on the ground can make a big difference for insects," Dr. Swiger says. "This can be concentrated to one area of the yard or a flower bed to keep an area looking tidy and to avoid impacting the grass underneath."

The caterpillars we see during the fall also need a pile of fallen leaves to overwinter to become the butterflies we'll get to see in the spring. This is a great reason not to rake, or at least to leave a few piles around your yard.

Avoid Pesticides Whenever Possible and Always Read the Label

Winter is also a time to avoid treating for pests around the house and inadvertently killing beneficial insects. Pest populations are generally lower during the colder months of the year and can be handled without insecticides. If insecticides are needed, they should be used intermittently or as a spot treatment only.

"Keep in mind that there are more beneficial insects than 'bad bugs' in most gardens and yards," Dr. Swiger says. "Many beneficial insects also feed on those less desirable ones." It is important to read the pesticide label to ensure that you don't inadvertently kill beneficial insects or the plants that they live on or feed from. "When in doubt, hold out," says Dr. Swiger.



Ornamental Sunflowers:

Versatile Varieties Offer An Array of New Colors

By Calvin Trostle, Ph.D., Professor & Extension Agronomist Texas A&M AgriLife, State Hemp & Sunflower Specialist

My backyard has some surprises. Still somewhat unknown, there are many different colors and even petal patterns in ornamental sunflowers. This is a fun part of being the AgriLife Extension State Specialist for farm sunflowers. I get to enjoy sunflowers beyond the field. The photo at right shows two of my favorites.



Ornamental sunflowers are now somewhat common, though many gardeners are still unfamiliar with the different types. Flower lovers will likely find small packets of mixed colors, like the ones below, for sale in the spring at their favorite garden store. These are sunflower types that generally produce one large head, though often with many secondary buds. Sunflowers you buy in pots typically are more bushy in growth and will naturally have many heads rather than one primary head.



Tips for Seeded Ornamental Sunflowers

Most ornamental sunflowers are not genetically pure like the commercial sunflowers farmers grow for oil, confectionary seed, sunflower meats, or dove hunting. Farmer sunflowers are genetically uniform and produce one yellow sunflower per stalk. But ornamental sunflowers are still somewhat close to their wild relatives. Most can still have one large flower per stalk, but they might develop many secondary heads. It is the gardener's decision whether you would like a large single flower or perhaps a tall bushy plant with a dozen or more blooms per plant. Most gardeners plant sunflowers with the expectation of one large flower.

To enhance ornamental sunflower growth for a larger, impressive single flower, growers may need to "pinch" off secondary buds that form in the crotch between the stalk and leaf stem. Some secondary buds may also form on the back side of the head. For an individual gardener this may take a few minutes once a week for a few weeks. Removing these secondary buds, which typically produce small flowers, will eliminate this parasitic growth. Nutrients and water resources can be directed to the main flower. This is especially important for cut flowers. If a grower is curious about what a plant will look like with many blooms, then leave some plants unpinched.

When to Plant

Most ornamental sunflowers will have a suggested planting range on the seed packet. In general, sunflowers can germinate in cool conditions and tolerate cool temperatures as low as 36°F at night. You can plant them as early as your area's last average spring freeze date or within 60 days of your first average fall 32°F.

Try Online Shopping for an Array of Sunflower Colors and Petal Patterns

These websites offer a world of ornamental sunflowers:

[Sunflower Selections](#). Dr. Tom Heaton's life-long hobby in full color. This website is for individual varieties in contrast to the mixes pictured above. You can purchase 100 seeds for as little as \$6, and up to 10,000 seeds or more.

[Sunflower Steve](#). Until recently this company offered individual varieties, but currently is only selling blends.

Your favorite garden catalogs will also have a few varieties of individual sunflowers, but Sunflower Selections likely supplies most of the seeds.

Sunflower Photography

In my role as state Extension specialist for sunflowers I get a few calls a year from someone asking where they can go to take pictures of sunflower fields. If they call soon enough in the year (May) they may not need to drive far, as there are commercial fields in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Additional fields are scattered in south and central Texas to attract dove for hunting. I have answered requests for where a wedding party could take photos in a sunflower field to a high school senior wanting senior pictures.

Tips for Sunflower Photography

Sunflower imagery is best for photos within 30 to at most 45 minutes after sunrise. The yellow light of the early sun enhances the yellows of sunflower to a vivid glow! Sunflower heads are all facing east in the morning then track the sun throughout the day (nutration, but this stops soon after sunflowers begin initial bloom). Brighter sunlight later in the day bleaches out the vivid yellow of sunflowers. Evening pictures before sunset do not find uniform west-facing heads, and the colors don't seem quite as strong as early in the morning.

Jeff Raska, Horticulture Coordinator, Retires

By Zandra Faris and Cynthia Jones, DCMGA Communications Team Leaders

In recognition of Jeff Raska's exemplary service and dedication, an official resolution was adopted by the Dallas County Commissioner's Court on December 5th. During his years with AgriLife Extension, Jeff has served in several key roles, creating far-reaching initiatives that will positively impact the residents of Dallas County for years to come.

After ten years with the Horticulture Department of the Coppell Independent School District, Jeff served as a project specialist for the curriculum-based program, "Learn, Grow, Eat, & Go" (LGEG), which was written as part of a USDA grant study of childhood obesity in eight Dallas ISD schools. LGEG engages school children in an interdisciplinary program combining academics, gardening, nutrient-dense food experiences, physical activity, and school and family engagement. He coordinated many school garden installations which provided outdoor learning labs through the [REAL School Gardens](#) program.

Jeff has a passion for chickens, which gave him the opportunity to share his wisdom and knowledge as 4-H Program Assistant and Backyard Chicken Specialist for Dallas County. He guided many area school districts by writing protocols as well as a national school model for Washington, D. C. schools. Many area schools have chicken coops that serve as a great way for students to learn about biology, compassionate animal husbandry, food science, and sustainable living practices.

As Horticulture Coordinator, Jeff designed and built the Urban County Farm at the Road and Bridge 1 (R&B 1) District Office located at 715 Rowlett Rd. in Garland, Texas. This bountiful garden on 12 acres teaches residents in Dallas County and beyond about the farm-to-plate journey in an urban setting. Collaborating with Dr. Theresa Daniels and other county officials, Jeff has worked tirelessly with Dallas County Master Gardeners (DCMGs) to reduce local food insecurity by growing tons of nutritious fruits and vegetables that are shared with several area homeless shelters and food kitchens. Under his guidance, DCMGs have taught residents about vegetable farming in small garden plots and raised beds and inspired the establishment of community gardens throughout Dallas County. The Urban County Farm is a model for



communities everywhere to eliminate food deserts and reduce obesity, diabetes, and other chronic diseases.

Jeff's contributions to the Master Gardener program also deserve praise and gratitude. In addition to overseeing the Master Gardener school and sharing his vast horticultural knowledge, he worked with the Dallas County Master Gardener Association during the pandemic to create safety guidelines in accordance with Dallas County. He supported new strategies to fulfill our mission to educate the public using technology and communication strategies via virtual platforms like Zoom and YouTube, methods used to this day.

Our sincerest thanks for Jeff's selfless dedication to TAMU AgriLife Extension and to the Master Gardener program. He has certainly left his mark on Dallas County and the hundreds of Master Gardeners with whom he has shared his wisdom and experience. May he enjoy a well-deserved retirement!



January 17, 2024 7:00 p.m. - 8:00 p.m. [Year-Round Blooms with Native Perennials](#) The Jewish Community Center, 7900 North Haven, Dallas. Speaker is Janet D. Smith. This presentation shows how to have flowering plants year-round by using native perennials instead of having to spend time and money planting for each season.

January 20, 2024 1:00pm - 2:00pm [Taking the Mystery Out of Plant Propagation](#) Dallas Public Library - Oak Lawn Branch, 4100 Cedar Springs Road, Dallas. Are you ready to solve the mystery of propagating new plants? Learn how to create new plants from cuttings, division, and layering, and discover the ABCs of seed collection, storage, and germination. Speaker is Roseann Ferguson.

January 21, 2024 3:00pm - 4:00pm [Texas Plant Tales](#) North Haven Gardens, 7700 Northaven Rd, Dallas. Native Texas plants have stories to tell. Find out which plant helps us sweep, which plant was needed by the Navy in WWII, which Texas native is associated with the French Legion of Honor Medal, and which native Texas tree made its way to Patrick Henry's home. These stories and more are presented. Speaker is Carolyn Rozier. Hosted by the Dallas Rose Society.

January 25, 2023 7:00pm - 9:00pm [Do's & Don'ts of Container Gardening](#) Bath House Cultural Center, 521 East Lawther, Dallas. Learn how to choose the container, the plants and the soil to grow beautiful flowers and flavorsome herbs and vegetables. Learn which plants are good companions and some combinations that "fight" for the limelight. The Bath House Cultural Center (presentation in lower level). Speaker is Barbara Gollman. Contact: jessica.trevizo@dallas.gov.

January 26, 2024 11:00am - 12:00pm [Year-Round Blooms with Native Perennials](#) Harry Stone Rec Center, 2403 Millmar Drive, Dallas. This presentation shows how to have flowering plants year-round by using native perennials instead of having to spend time and money planting for each. Speaker is Janet D. Smith.

February 2, 2024 10:00am - 11:00am [Growing African Violets](#) Juliette Fowler Communities. Contact: Cindy Wabner cindy.wabner@gmail.com. Growing African violets is not as hard as you might think. Learn to grow these spectacular plants in a windowsill or under a grow light. Speaker is Stephanie Smith.

February 7, 2024 11:00am - 12:00pm [Floral Design 101](#) North Haven Gardens, 7700 Northaven Rd, Dallas. Learn the basic steps to creating a creative flower design. Includes a lab for designers to practice. Speaker is Janet Nevil. Garden Masters, Inc. Contact: Sue Cobb suecobb217@gmail.com.

February 9, 2024 11:00am - 12:00pm [Starting a Vegetable Garden](#) Dallas Arboretum, Test Pavilion, 8525 Garland Rd.,

Dallas. Do you want to start a garden of herbs, flowers, or vegetables or a combination? This presentation outlines the first steps to take. It covers basic garden needs as well as what to grow, where to locate a garden, and where to get more information. Speaker is Stephen Seewoester.

February 10, 2024 11:30am - 12:30pm [Basic Garden Planning](#) Willie B. Johnson Rec Center, 12225 Willowdell Drive, Dallas. Do you want to start a garden of herbs, flowers, or vegetables or a combination? This presentation outlines the first steps to take. It covers basic garden needs as well as what to grow, where to locate a garden, and where to get more information. Speaker is Stephen Seewoester. Hands-on activities and give-aways after the presentation.

[View More at the DCMGA's Current Calendar of Events](#)



February

It's still cold but garden tasks are heating up. Get those seeds going and potatoes in the ground.

Download the [Vegetable Planting Chart for North Texas](#)

Planting

- Plant asparagus, beets, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, cilantro, collards, English peas, lettuce, kohlrabi, onion transplants, parsley, potatoes, radishes, spinach, Swiss chard, and turnips.
- Continue to plant evergreen shrubs, fruit, nut, and shade trees.
- Plant early spring-blooming annuals like dianthus, petunias, and alyssum in late February.

Plant Care

- Apply horticultural oil to fruit and pecan trees, and to scale-prone shrubs such as euonymus and hollies, when temperature is 45-65 for two weeks (mid-February). Check the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service website bookstore for a pamphlet on the Homeowner's Fruit and Nut Spray Schedule.
- Fertilize cool-season grasses such as fescue and ryegrass with a slow-release fertilizer.
- Apply pre-emergent herbicides to established lawns to control warm-season broadleaf and grassy weeds, such as dandelions and crabgrass no later than early March.
- Fertilize pansies and other winter annuals with your favorite fertilizer.
- Continue to protect tender plants from hard freezes.

Pruning

- Complete pruning of oak trees before February 15 to minimize chance of oak wilt infestation. Note: Do not prune live oaks or red oaks from Feb.15 to June 30. If you must prune then, always "paint" the cut end with tree wound paint, being very careful not to paint over the collar of the cut.
- Prune other shade trees and woody shrubs as necessary to remove dead wood and improve structure.
- Finish pruning pecan trees and fruit trees before spring bud break.
- Prune all standard roses, except climbing varieties, by about 50% by mid-February.
- Prune tall Nandinas, if necessary, to improve fullness, by removing one-third of the tallest canes at 2-3" above ground level (late February). Repeat the next two years.
- Before spring growth begins, trim or mow grassy groundcovers (such as liriopse and mondo grass) that are ragged or have freeze damage.

New this month on our DCMGA Website:



Herbs in Containers

By Cindy Bolz



Would you enjoy the convenience of having fresh basil, oregano, and rosemary only two minutes from your kitchen? Try planting them in a container that can remain outdoors most of the year, but can be moved into the garage when we are expecting one of our few winter freezes. [Read more...](#)

Protect Your Plants During the Coming Freeze

By DCMG Help Desk Team, Rick Coke



It looks likely that the Dallas area will soon experience a series of hard freezes. Unfortunately, we have had unusually warm conditions so far this winter, so many of our plants are unprepared for temperatures in the low



20s. What can you do to protect your plants and improve their chances of thriving after the freeze? [Read more ...](#)

Plant of the Month - Possumhaw Holly (*Ilex decidua*)

By At Home Botanist Team



The Possumhaw Holly, or "*Ilex decidua*", is a deciduous shrub known for its impressive display of bright red berries during the winter months. These small, bright berries are persistently visible after the plant has shed its leaves for the season and create a stunning contrast to a sleepier winter garden landscape. [Read more ...](#)

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