

Leave the Weeds Bee, March 7-13

To combat bee and pollinator decline around the country, the practices of delayed mowing and pesticide avoidance on the lawn are growing trends. The total mowed lawn area in the United States is roughly the size of New England. That means collectively what we do to our lawns has a significant impact on the environment. And since the aesthetic and horticultural norm for lawns in the U.S. is closely a cropped monoculture, lawns are often considered “biological deserts” when it comes to pollinators and many other forms of wildlife.

So, here is the buzz about delaying mowing. While it may seem counterintuitive to let weeds and wildflowers flourish, this bee-friendly approach to lawn care can make a world of difference for our myriad pollinator friends.

Remember that honeybees are from Europe as were many of the settlers in America. Consequently, many of our lawn “weeds” are European imports which are important early nectar and pollen sources for honeybees. This lengthy list includes burr clover, chickweed, crimson clover, dandelions, henbit, purple deadnettle, and white “Dutch” clover.

On the other hand, native Texas wildflowers are a vital food source for our hundreds of native bees, offering a rich supply of nectar and pollen essential for their survival. Many of these bees are pollen specialist and require specific plants. These small flowers, often considered weeds by traditional lawn standards, play a crucial role in supporting bee populations and promoting biodiversity. Examples of native lawn “weeds” or wildflowers include bluebonnets, blue-eyed grass, buttercups, Carolina anemone, crow poison, ladies tress orchids, spring beauty, violets, wild geraniums, and wild onions.

From the perspective of a bee, an unmowed lawn dotted with introduced and native wildflowers is a veritable buffet of sustenance. With each flower they visit, bees collect nectar to fuel their energy and pollen to feed their offspring. Delaying mowing allows these floral resources to remain available for longer periods, ensuring bees have ample food to thrive.

Timing is everything when it comes to bee-friendly lawn care. By delaying mowing until after wildflowers have finished blooming and set seeds (or at least until as long as you can tolerate), we can maximize the benefits for bees. A number of gardeners in the South are now practicing “NO MOW MARCH” giving the lawn over to the pollinators until April. Allowing the flowers to complete their life cycle ensures that bees have access to both nectar and pollen, supporting their health and reproductive success.

Another suggestion for a pollinator friendly landscape is setting aside a portion of your property, farm, lake lot, roadside, “back forty,” or vacant lot for taller native grasses and wildflowers. These are known as “pocket prairies” and should only be mowed once a year to allow for spring, summer, and fall wildflowers as well as nesting sites for stem and ground nesting native bees along with our many butterflies including spring and fall migrating monarch butterflies.

The benefits of bee-friendly lawn care extend beyond the bees themselves. Bees are essential pollinators for many of the fruits, vegetables, and flowers that we rely on for food and beauty not to mention the thousands of species of native flowers, shrub, and trees in East Texas. By supporting bee populations, we also safeguard the health of our different Texas ecosystems and ensure a diversity of both plants and pollinators for future generations here.



Native and introduced “weeds” are critical sources of pollen and nectar for early season bees and butterflies.

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Mexican Plum, March 14-20

Mexican plum is one of our native plum tree species found in Waller County. No, it does not produce a large plum like you would purchase in the grocery store, but it is in the same genus, *Prunus*, as cultivated plum trees. Though it does not produce large fruit, Mexican plum is a gorgeous deciduous tree and is widely planted as an ornamental.

Mexican plum can be found throughout central and east Texas, however 9 times out of 10 it will be found as a solitary tree. In the wild, the tree is found in wetter sites including creek bottoms and moist slopes. It is also found in fence rows, woodland edges, pastures, and along roadsides. The tree tops out at 25 feet, resulting in a small tree for Waller County standards. The trunk is relatively short compared to the height of the tree which results in a short crown of dull green foliage. Mexican plum makes up for its short stature by its showy white flowers during late February and March. The flowers appear prior to the leaves and will cover the entire crown in a white blanket. Due to its showy flowers and because it blooms while most of the woods are still dormant, the Mexican plum is easily visible from a distance when it is blooming. If you are driving down the road during this time of year and see a solitary tree in a pasture blanketed with white flowers it is likely a Mexican plum. After blooming, simple, alternate leaves, 2 to 4 inches long appear and are pointed at the tip and rounded at the base. Leaves turn yellow or sometimes red in the fall. Just like its cultivated cousin, Mexican plum will produce a plum fruit that ripens in late summer. The fruit is slightly over an inch in diameter and dark purple red with a bluish bloom.

Mexican plum has numerous benefits for both humans and wildlife. Native Americans sun-dried the fruit for winter consumption and the fruit can also be eaten raw or turned into jelly. The fleshy part of the fruit can range in taste from sweet to inedible. Take care not to eat the seeds, pits, or leaves as they can be toxic. Wildlife benefits include pollinators such as butterflies and honeybees that are attracted to the flowers. The fruit is consumed by a variety of birds and mammals.

Mexican plum is not our only plum tree species found in Texas. Another common wild plum tree found in Texas is the flatwood plum. The flatwood plum and Mexican plum have

similar looking leaves, flowers, and fruits. There are subtle differences, but unless you are a botanist it can be difficult. However, the flatwood plum is restricted to sandy creek banks and bottomlands. It is typically shorter in height and appears more as understory brush lacking the open crown appearance of Mexican plum.

If you are looking for a small ornamental tree to plant in your yard, I would highly recommend planting a Mexican plum. They can be purchased from commercial nurseries and not only will your landscaping pop with white flowers, but you can turn the fruit into tasty wild plum jelly!



Eastern Bluebird Perched on Flowering Mexican Plum Tree

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Strategies For Drought, March 21-27

During a drought, little can be done to increase forage pasture growth. Proper management can minimize impacts of drought on your operation when it does, and it will, occur. Careful management early in a drought can minimize long term stand damage and help maintain forage yields when rains do come. If pastures are managed properly during times of low moisture, the effects of drought will be less severe, and pastures will rebound faster when precipitation is sufficient. Remember, management practices that minimize damage to pastures during drought are also the same for maintaining healthy pastures in a normal year.

Managing livestock: Reduce stocking rate if you believe forage supply will be limited. First, cull cows that are open, in poor condition, or have poor disposition. A veterinarian can palpate cows for pregnancy and check for health problems that warrant elimination from the herd. Cows that are not pregnant are difficult to justify feeding expensive hay. Moving cattle to leased grazing lands where forage is available is an option to move cattle from stressed pastures without selling off a portion of the herd. Another option is early weaning and sale of calves. This reduces the stocking pressure and reduces the nutrient requirement of the cows (reducing forage intake by 20%) because the heavy nutrient demand at lactation is stopped. The longer decisions to decrease livestock numbers are delayed the sooner the forage supply will be exhausted. Delaying the decision to reduce stocking during a drought accelerates financial losses of the livestock production enterprise.

Grazing management: Lack of moisture suppresses plant growth and retards root development. Allow 6-8 inches of new growth before allowing livestock to graze. A healthy pasture will have 3 to 6 inches of stubble. In severe drought, pastures may not reach this stubble height, so these pastures should be deferred until the time of dormancy (when nights are 55 degrees F for warm-season grass pastures) and then grazed to 3 -4 inch stubble height. Those pastures with little or no green growth are living off the roots and root mass has declined substantially. Roots must be replaced or bare areas will increase and invader grasses/weeds will prevail. In addition, overgrazing of plants removes the buds needed for re-growth. If insufficient stubble remains, water capture and infiltration is reduced. So, when it does rain again less water will enter the soil stores for plant growth. Stocking rates must be reduced on all types of forage. Fertilizer inputs should be reduced or stopped during periods of reduced precipitation, and rotational stocking should be considered to increase harvest efficiency, forage utilization, and flexibility of herd management.

Weed management: Do not apply herbicides during a drought. Plant mechanisms in response to a drought will prevent adequate entry of herbicides into plants and result in a high cost application with little control of the specific weed.



Cows and calves grazing Coastal bermudagrass

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Mulch Volcano, March 28 - April 3

Mulching around trees is about as common practice in landscaping as drivers stopping at a red light. Most homeowners and landscapers mulch either because they know the benefits or believe it is the right thing to do because they see everyone else doing it. However, this practice of following in your neighbor's footsteps has resulted in bad mulching practices.

If you are going to mulch around your tree you need to understand the benefits and why we mulch. Mulch can either be organic or inorganic, (plant material or nonliving material) and comes in a variety of shapes, colors, and sizes. Bark or wood chips, both organic, are commonly used to mulch around trees. Organic mulch will eventually break down overtime

and improve soil health by adding organic matter, improving soil structure, and nutrient availability. The downside to organic mulch is it will require being replenished compared to inorganic mulch. Other benefits of mulching include moderating root zone temperatures, encouraging moisture conservation, controlling weeds, preventing soil crusting, improving soil aeration, and reducing soil erosion. It also improves the aesthetic appearance of landscaping by creating a manicured appearance. For all its good benefits which improves the health of your tree, when mulch is applied improperly it can cause negative impacts.

Mulch volcano is the slang term for the common practice of placing mulch in a cone around and next to the trunk 8 to 12 inches high and extending up to 3 feet in diameter. This will result in restricting oxygen exchange with the roots. But of more concern is the moist environment that is created at the base of the stem that can cause cracking of bark creating an entry point for insects and fungal growth.

Proper application of mulch includes a layer no more than 2-3 inches thick. Also, avoid piling mulch up against the trunk of the tree. Instead, mulch several inches away from the trunk allowing air to move freely. Mulch should be applied in a ring at least 4 to 6 feet in diameter, however you can increase the ring size as large as you wish as it will further benefit the tree. If using rocks as mulch avoid using white or black, instead choose a natural color as it will decrease the effects of strong sunlight. Impermeable mulches such as plastic should never be used around a tree.

So, avoid the peer pressure of your neighbors to create a mulch volcano and follow the proper mulching steps. In the end your tree will be healthier, and you would have done your part to turn the tide on the mulch volcano.



Row of Trees Demonstrating the Improperly Applied Mulch Volcano

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