A publication of...

TRAVIS COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS

THE COMPOST BIN

July 2007

Speaker for July: Skip Richter

“Skip” Richter has had gardening in his life for over 35 years, since he started his first garden as a 4-H project. He has gardened in the acid sands of the East Texas pine woods to the arid, high pH soils of central Texas. His pursuits include establishing a pick-your-own strawberry patch and peach orchard. His travels have taken him to gardening and commercial horticulture sites across the United States as well as in the Netherlands, Austria, and Bulgaria.

Skip's gardening tastes tend toward the eccentric and eclectic. "I have learned all the rules of landscaping and find them well-intentioned silliness for the most part," says Skip, adding, "Gardening is for food and for fun. Grow what you like in the way you like, that's the rule!"

Castle-dwelling stuffed shirts like Louis XIV would definitely find Skip's landscape and gardens lacking straight lines and right angles. Plus, they may not approve of old western boots or bathroom fixtures used as planting containers!

Skip writes a weekly newspaper column and a bi-weekly internet gardening column that is syndicated across the south and southeastern U.S. and has authored numerous articles for statewide, regional, and national gardening magazines. He currently serves as the Travis County Extension Horticulturist with the Texas Cooperative Extension Service, where he conducts educational programs on a wide variety of subjects from hobby/recreational gardening to commercial horticulture.

He also appears on radio and television gardening programs in the Austin, Texas area, and has a weekly spot on the "Central Texas Gardener" television program. He has a new Web site (http://gardeningwithskip.tamu.edu where you can view his syndicated TV spots called "Gardening With Skip."

Skip's topic will be: "Tips for Searching the Internet for Research Based Gardening Information". Skip and Patty Leander have just finished some tomato trials, and will be bringing these for us to “Taste Test”

Bring your own favorite salsa made from your fresh garden tomatoes or just sample one of the many at this month’s Master Gardner meeting on **Thursday, July the 5th.**

Regards,
Jerry Naiser

Message From the President

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF MASTER GARDENER PROTOCOL HERE!

Every few years I find out that some very basic information that Master Gardeners need to know has not been passed down to the new folks, and some things that have changed have not been made clear to everyone. Jot this down to entirely understandable assumptions by those of us who have been around here awhile that every one of us is already on the same page. But to make a necessary regular correction to the situation, I'm taking this opportunity to outline some of the more important guidelines. You can test your knowledge of Master Gardener protocol entirely in the privacy of your home! See how many you already know, and give yourself a good pat on the back.

1. The Travis County Master Gardeners Association is NOT a garden club, it is a community service organization that exists within a program of the Texas Cooperative Extension. Although we have our own governing board and finances to be able to run local programs without constant direction from Extension, our primary function is to assist Extension Horticulture promote sound gardening practices to the general public. Extension owns the Master Gardener name, and we could not be an association without being part of Extension.

2. Master Gardeners may NOT under any circumstances use their certification as a Master Gardener to solicit or acquire business. That means you cannot advertise yourself as a Master Gardener to get gardening or horticulture-related work, and you cannot use the Master Gardener logo in advertising. (It is especially unconscionable to solicit work from callers at the phone desk, but I know y'all wouldn't do that.)

3. It is against the law to recommend the use of a pesticide in a manner inconsistent with its label. Always be very careful of how you recommend pesticides. You can be personally liable. By using product recommendations listed in Extension publications you can avoid this problem, and always tell folks to read and follow the labeled instructions.

4. Extension has a more general protocol similar to No. 2 that requires that we never recommend any product, even non-pesticides, for a use other than the one that the product is labeled for. That means we cannot recommend home remedies such as sodium bicarbonate, milk, vinegar, etc. for various plant maladies, because those products are not labeled for that use. Before you recommend a "natural" remedy, make sure you read the label yourself. I hear about many products that are potentially useful for dealing with insects or diseases, and are products that are packaged and available in nurseries, but are not labeled for the use many people want to use it for. Soil conditioners that folks want to use as fire ant killers come to mind, along with many uses of corn-based products. Try to understand that just because a product may have seemed to work once, doesn't mean it will work on all plants in all weather conditions in all places. It takes a lot more trials to understand how and when something will work. Extension promotes scientific research-based data as the basis for all of our recommendations, so as Master Gardeners we need to tap into the broad range of Extension research provided in the TAMU websites and publications for all of our gardening discussions with the public.

5. Master Gardeners must NOT ever recommend a particular product or busi

ness, or disparage a particular product or business in our dealings with the public. We cannot suggest that a particular product or business is better than others, which some people will assume if you give out a recommendation for where to buy a product. We can especially never, ever say anything bad about a business, no matter what our personal experiences. As far as products go, we can recommend active ingredients based on Extension research, and the public can then go in search of products that contain that ingredient, and we can recommend brand names if they are listed in Extension publications. As far as inquiries about businesses go, it is best to tell folks to get recommendations from friends and neighbors, or to call up businesses in their area to ask about their services. Although we give out certified arborist lists at the phone desk, we cannot recommend a single arborist off of the list to anyone. Remember, Extension is here to serve the businesses, too!

6. As Master Gardeners we cannot recommend only organic or only chemical treatments. Our job is to explain the way products work and outline the pros and cons of each option to let the public make their own informed decisions. I know this is hard for some of our hardier organic folks, but when you have your Master Gardener hat on, you need to be a source of all horticulture information.

7. A person who becomes certified as a Texas Master Gardener can continue to be a Master Gardener without joining an association, but obviously cannot participate in Master Gardener sponsored activities.

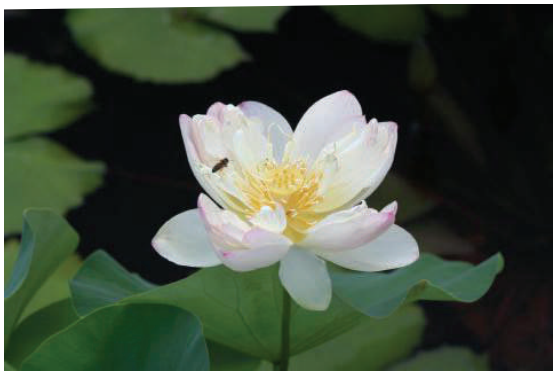
I don't want to overdo it here, so I'll leave it at that for now. I'll just challenge all of you out there to send me some examples of important guidelines that we all must follow that I can share with the group next month. I have always thought that clear and accurate communication is of paramount importance in getting a group to work together effectively, so let's make sure we are all really on the same page and working toward the same goals.

Thanks for all you do,

Susan Decker
President

Plant Portrait: The Lotus *(Nelumba sp.)*

A dramatic water garden feature in flower, this plant with saucer-shaped leaves also is very attractive even when not in flower. Lotus is great for a small water garden or just let it grow wild to fill a large pond space.



The distinctive leaves are large and blue-green with an indentation where the sturdy stem attaches. Early in the season the leaves stay at water level, but as more leaves appear, they rise majestically above the water, each one higher than the others on sturdy stalks. In a bigger pond or pool the leaves are large enough to provide shade and protection for fish and wildlife. The leaves have an interesting ability to capture droplets of water in the middle of the water-repellant leaf. When the wind moves the water rolls and sparkles like jewels.

As the summer progresses, a long awaited bud will appear, followed by a spectacular flower. The Asian Sacred Lotus has white petals with a pinkish blush surrounding a salt shaker or shower head type central structure (more about this later). The North American native has large, fragrant, pale yellow flowers which bloom from July through September.

There are only two species of Lotus in the world. The North American native (*Nelumbo lutea*) grows from Texas to Florida and north to Ontario and Minnesota. It is very hardy and can survive to zone 4 (as long as the roots do not freeze). The Sacred Lotus, (*Nelumbo nucifera*) described above, is an Asian, European and Australian native. From these two species are lots of hybrids (over 600!) that range from a single row of petals to fully double and in colors of white to pink to yellow.

Visit http://www.victoria-adventure.org/lotus/lotus_names_main.html to see one of the best listing of Lotus cultivars (with great descriptions). This website also has a great collection of Lotus pictures http://www.victoria-adventure.org/lotus/galleries_main.html

In China the Sacred Lotus has been grown for at least 4,000 years so there are lots of mystique and legends. Lotus is revered because they are viewed to grow out of the mud pure and clean. It symbolizes purity, beauty, prosperity, fertility and divine wisdom. The world's most beautiful flower is also the most sacred among many religions.

In addition to spiritual value, the Sacred Lotus has many edible uses. The root tubers, leaves and seeds are staples of Asian diets. The tubers can be eaten fresh or canned. The flower petals are used in soups or as a garnish. The leaves are used to wrap sticky rice or dim-sum. The seeds are roasted and the rhizome boiled. The North American lotus (or *Yanquapin*) was also used for food by the native peoples.

The seed pod is very ornamental, looking like a salt shaker or shower head. It is often used in arrangements or crafts.

Seeds remain viable for centuries and have a hard dark brown, black or gray seed coat that is almost completely impermeable to water. Seeds will not produce an exact duplicate of the parent unless the species is being grown. The seeds are mature when the seed pod bends downward and they fall into the water. The seeds remain dormant even if conditions are ideal for germination. Scientists believe that this long dormancy is a survival mechanism. Since the lotus is very vigorous and grows fast from vegetative runners, a seed would be shaded out by the many leaves. The marble size seed stays dormant while aquatic herbivores (muskrats or beavers) graze on the tasty leaves and after several seasons eat most of the plants. Once the plant is thoroughly grazed,

the seeds sprout and have a better chance of survival. To get the seed to germinate manually, the trick is to remove the outer coating with a knife or file without harming the internal structure. There are some great step-by-step instructions at this website. http://www.victoria-adventure.org/lotus/growing_from_seed.html

Lotus is easy to divide but always is a very messy, mucky job. They grow from large tubers that look like an overgrown elongated brown slug. When dividing the clump, look for a firm tuber with a healthy growing tip. Don't damage this fragile (and crucial growing point). Replant with the tip just at the soil surface.

To grow Lotus in containers, select a sturdy large, round one so tubers don't get jammed into the corners. Many types of soil are fine for growing Lotus but avoid those that have light material like bark chips that will float away. Plant the tuber in the soil with the growing tip showing and pointed toward the center of the container. Fertilize regularly with water garden tablets.

Many larger ponds are ideal for Lotus. They can be grown in a pot and sunk into a pond if containment is a priority or planted in the pond bottom and allowed to expand. Make sure the pot has at least 8" of water depth above the soil surface. The best pond grown location is in shallow, still water, up to 4 ft. deep, with a mud bottom.

Lotus love full sun conditions and can really thrive in our Texas heat. Just don't let the pond or pool dry out. If the leaves wilt, they won't recover.

Anne Marie Van Nest

In the Vegetable Garden

The generous rainfall in May and June helped contribute to fast growing, highly productive plants this season, but the bugs and diseases will catch up soon, and by mid-month (if not sooner) the corn, green beans, squash, and most of the cucumbers and tomatoes will have cratered. Their flavor is compromised and they just don't produce as well in the heat, so I prefer to pull them and start fresh in August. Okra, eggplant, peppers, cream peas, melons and some cherry tomatoes, such as Juliet, will continue to produce into fall if kept well-watered, mulched and fertilized.

When the heat takes the fun out of growing your own food outside, how about growing your own alfalfa sprouts inside? They are easy to grow, nutritious, and are ready to eat in 4-5 days.

A variety of seed for sprouting can be purchased through seed catalogs (try www.johnnyseeds.com or www.superseeds.com) and can also be found in the bulk spice section at Whole Foods and Central Market.

There are 3 simple steps for growing sprouts:

Soak
Rinse
Drain

First, soak 2 tablespoons of alfalfa seed in a 1 quart Mason jar overnight. Cover the opening with cheesecloth, a piece of nylon pantyhose, or a special sprouting lid with holes for drainage. I purchased my sprouting lids from Pine tree Seeds – www.superseeds.com. The next morning drain off the water (I drain the water into my compost bucket or use it to water seedlings) and cover the seeds so they are not exposed to light by either placing the jar in a paper bag or wrapping the jar in foil.

Lay it sideways on the counter so the seeds so the seeds are spread out. Gently rinse and drain the seeds with tepid water 2-3 times a day. After 3 or 4 days, expose your sprouts to bright light (but not direct sun) for a day so they can green up. Give them one final rinse and they are ready to eat or may be stored in the refrigerator for up to a week.

If you've never had grilled okra, be sure to give it a try this summer. Just toss the whole pods in olive oil, sprinkle with salt and pepper and grill for 10-15 minutes. Quite delicious and no slime (not that okra slime is a bad thing!).

Here's to a bountiful harvest,
Patty Leander

The Greenhouse Bench

Master Gardener greenhouse volunteers, give yourself a well-deserved pat on the back. The volunteer hours for the greenhouse as of May are over 1050, up from 794 hours through May of 2006. Thank you to everyone who has volunteered and please keep coming.

The June greenhouse workday was quiet but still productive. We are continuing to bump-up the 4" Zilkerfest plants into gallons. We bumped up rosemary and basil. Thanks to all of you who donated gallon pots. To make this process simpler for the volunteers, we ask that in the future, you rinse the pots before bringing them. And to those who did, another thank you.

And speaking of pots, we have quite a collection of various shapes and sizes. Our plan is to organize and cull the pots that are unusable for the greenhouse. We will toss the pots that are damaged and offer the odd sized pots to Master Gardeners. Stay tuned for when this feat will actually take place.

The rain collection system finally reached full capacity for the first time. We are very excited to be able to use only rainwater for our irrigation needs. The irrigation system is working well and with our fabulous waterers, the plants are looking forward to a hot but moist summer. The greenhouse committee, with Marian Stasney at the helm, is continuing to research options for repaving the pathway. In the meantime, Plexiglas barriers are being installed to divert the over-spray from wetting the pathway which is causing this slippery situation. We also added to our stock of mother plants at the Texas A & M Forest Service annual plant sale recently.

If you haven't melted yet and are still enjoying working in your gardens, don't forget that the greenhouse still has plants for sale. We have gallon size plants for either sun or shade areas. If you have specific needs for your upcoming projects, please notify Anne, Molly or Marian to request those plants in advance so we can plan on fulfilling the needs of the community.

Anne Van Nest

Skip's Corner: "Wasps Reconsidered"

I remember summers growing up in south central Texas. Climbing trees, playing outdoor games, running barefooted…there are a lot of good memories. There are also some not so great ones. At the top of that list are paper wasps. It was inevitable that every summer I was destined to get stung at least once by these dive bombing six legged terrorists who clearly had it out for me. The fact that I owned a slingshot and found their nests a challenging target probably contributed to the problem.

I recall one August day when it occurred to me that I had not been stung once all summer! Later that day while retrieving a ball from beneath a Ligustrum bush the wasps insured their perfect record was still intact. I have plenty more great and exciting stories about my youthful encounters with wasps but that is not the purpose of this article. The basic point is that I hated those things and could find no reason whatsoever for their existence.

Now as a gardener and a student of nature's interrelated balancing act I have gained a new perspective on these insects. Wasps are predators, feeding on insects such as caterpillars, flies and beetle larvae. I have on many occasions seen one in the garden perched on a leaf or tomato cage chomping up a caterpillar to take back to their nest to feed to their larvae.

Webworms are a common problem in our southern landscapes. Wasps fly around looking for a way into the nest. The caterpillars build the webbing around branches of leaves so they can spend the day feeding on the leaves, protected from predators by the webbing. Go out and break up the webbing with a broom or a yard rake. Then check back in about 15 - 30 minutes and you'll most likely see wasps flying in to haul away the bounty.

I did this with one of my daughters once and we had a fascinating show. That brings me to another point. Wasps are not out to sting us just for the fun (or meanness) of it. They sting when threatened and especially to protect their nest. We watched the webworm carnage from a couple of feet away with wasps flying around us giving no thought to our presence.

It has been estimated that a large paper wasp nest will consume 2000 caterpillars in a season. Not bad.

If you are interested in learning more about paper wasps in your landscape and garden the following website from North Carolina State University provides helpful information on them and their beneficial role:

Using Paper Wasps for Caterpillar Management in the Landscape

http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/ent/notes/Other/note121/note121.html

The web site also suggests building a simple structure for them to nest in. That way you choose where they are allowed to live in your landscape. Hmmm, I'm not so sure that one will catch on like bird or bat houses.

There are many more relatives of paper wasps that also serve a beneficial function. Among these are the dirt daubers which include the potter wasps that make the marble sized round mud balls on your screens. I once broke open a couple of potter wasp mud balls to find almost a dozen looper type caterpillars inside. Thank you very much!

Then there are the tiny Encarsia wasps that parasitize insect eggs, the Braconid wasps that produce those white elongated pupal cases on tomato hornworms, the aphid parasitoids that turn a green or yellow aphid into a tan puffy dry shell before emerging as an adult to continue the entomological horror movie…way cool! This brief listing doesn't begin to give justice to the long list of beneficial wasp species in our gardens.

Oh sure I still cringe at the thought of a wasp sting. Nests being constructed near the front or back door or in any location where the family will be still have to go. But those "out back" or in an out of the way spot get to stay.

I should add that none in my family is allergic to wasp stings or I would not tolerate them on the property because allergic reactions can represents a life threatening situation. Nevertheless we now share our place with a number of wasp nests. They do their part in helping to manage caterpillars around the landscape and garden, and I now keep my slingshot pointed in another direction.

Skip Richter
Travis County Extension Horticulturist

Over the Fence: "Do the Math on Rainwater Harvesting "

How many of you think you're good at math? Okay, well you two folks put your feet up while the rest of us go to work on a little word problem. Consider this – the population of Texas is expected to have grown from 20.8 million in 2000 to over 45.5 million in 2060. Water supplies are expected to decline by nearly 20 percent over the same period. At that rate, when do we run out of water? And yes, it's a test question.

If you're living in Port Arthur with an average annual rainfall of 60 inches per year, you may arrive at a different answer than those living in El Paso who see a measly 9 inches fall on average. In fact, different regions of Texas have produced over 4,500 different official strategies for dealing with this question. Too many numbers yet? Here in Central Texas where we've seen our population skyrocket, we already have to consult an oracle to see if it's okay to water our landscape on any given summer day. We know there's a problem, even if we don't have any answers.

Menard, Texas may seem an unlikely spot to look for solutions to the water challenges facing Texans in the years to come. But you can see the history

and the future of rainwater harvesting just about everywhere you look. People from all over the state travel to this one light town in the middle of nowhere to talk to Billy Kniffen, county extension agent for Menard County and rainwater harvesting guru. As part of a group of Texas Master Gardeners doing specialist training, I recently made the 3 hour drive from Austin to Menard and spent the better part of 3 days frantically taking notes and visiting rainwater collection sites to learn what's being done.

From the ancient cement and brick cisterns of the town's oldest homes to the 30,000 gallon system at a new multi-purpose building, it's evident rainwater collection is happening in a big way in this small town. Everywhere we looked, we saw rainwater harvesting systems. Some are large enough to supply the needs of homes with extensive gardens and some are small systems made from garbage cans just large enough to support a birdbath. Menard residents take this rainwater thing seriously. When the new library was completed and there was a little grant money left over, they put in a rainwater collection system and a demonstration garden. The 4-H show barn has a rainwater tank that furnishes water for bathing the animals and waters the landscape through a drip system. One secretary collects just enough to handle her greenhouse, fountain, and pond. A retired farmer has four 3000 gallon tanks to supply all the water needs of his new dream retirement home up on the crest of a hill, and a goat rancher is collecting water from the roof of his carport to irrigate the garden and turf area by his home. The property Billy Kniffen and his wife got for a song because it had no source of water now has a two story log cabin surrounded by a lush cottage garden. Roses, blackberries, and raised vegetable beds compete for space with native plants and grasses, including the State Grass of Texas – side oats. Their home, gardens, pond, workshop, and greenhouse are all supplied with water from the Kniffen's rainwater harvesting system.

So why should the average Central Texas homeowner bother to harvest rainwater? Billy says for most people it comes down to a question of either **quantity** or **quality**. They either understand the impending collision between supply and demand, or they appreciate how much better crops and plants grow when watered with rainfall rather than municipal water.

At my house, we go from 3 inches of standing water during a storm to dry, cracked clay a week later. Rainfall immediately whooshes off the roof to storm drains and pipes, taking with it topsoil and nutrients. And because our neighborhoods and streets replace natural groundcover with impervious surface, rain has less of a chance to soak into the soil. I'm hoping to channel some of the storm water into barrels, reducing the potential for ponding in low areas of the yard and reserving this free bounty for release during leaner, drier times through a gravity fed drip system. Well placed "rain gardens" planted with native plants and grasses can contain excess water inside of berms and encourage it to percolate down into the soil rather than standing or becoming storm runoff.

So, do the math. See what works for your home, whether it's big tanks sprouting like mushrooms out at your ranch or just a trash can turned into a wildlife watering hole.

Visit these websites for more information, and include one of our Travis County Rainwater Collection specialists in your next community event. (Renee Trepagnier, Jackie Johnson, Melissa Boyd, Maggie Walsh, Bud Kane, Ed Parkens and Vicki Blachman have all taken the training.)

http://rainwaterharvesting.tamu.edu
http://menard-co.tamu.edu/publications
http://tcebookstore.org (Rainwater Harvesting publications B-6153 and L-5482)
http://www.greenbuilder.com/sourcebook/Rainwater.html

Vicki Blachman

Nature Quest: A Nature Lover's Paradise in the Hill Country

April 24-29, 2007

Arriving just in time to participate in the welcome reception the evening of Tuesday, April 24, my friend, Susan, and I made our way down the long porch of House Pasture Cattle Co. in Concan, Texas (Uvalde County) to the Nature Quest registration table. We literally had to dodge dozens of hummingbirds competing for the sweet nectar in feeders hanging from the eave of the building. We would later learn from Bob Houck that these were actually working feeders, but more on that later. We were here to experience some hard-core nature, and judging by the hummer activity, we were not going to be disappointed.

Bright and early at 6:30 a.m. the next morning we ventured out for Birding at Kerr Wildlife Management Area, where we hoped to catch a glimpse of the black-capped vireo and golden-cheeked warbler. The Kerr Wildlife Management Area is owned and operated by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and serves as a land base for the Edwards Plateau ecological area to develop and manage wildlife habitats and populations of indigenous wildlife species. As luck would have it, Susan got to see the black-capped vireo and I saw the golden-cheeked warbler, along with many other species of birds. What a great way to start off our first Nature Quest adventure.

After a quick lunch, we headed out for Butterflying around Concan. Fortunately for us, the group was small, which made for an intimate butterflying (or flutterby(ing)) experience. We hiked along River Oaks Hiking Trail, which included hardwood riparian forest, grassy riparian edge, disturbed areas, and juniper breaks—all on the same trail. This allowed us to see many different species of butterflies as well as dragonflies not to mention native plants. The beauty of hiking with a master naturalist is they know a little bit about everything.

Later that evening, we joined up with a large group to go on an Owl Prowl with the goal of hearing and possibly seeing some owls. Although we didn't see any owls we did hear a couple of Eastern Screech Owls and a Chuck-will's-widow. Plus it was a perfect night for stargazing. Lucky for us, our master naturalist guide was somewhat knowledgeable about the sky, too!

The next morning we learned about Hummingbird Banding from Bob and Martha Sargeant of Clay, Alabama. The Sargeants are founders of the Hummer/Bird Study Group (HBSG), a non-profit organization dedicated to the study and preservation of hummingbirds and other Neo-tropical migrants (songbirds). This event was definitely one of the highlights of Nature Quest for me. While we weren't allowed to participate in the banding activity, we were given an opportunity to "hold" a hummingbird after it was weighed, measured, evaluated for body fat, determined whether or not the females were carrying eggs, and banded. But first, these aerial acrobats—mostly black-chinned and ruby-throated hummingbirds—had to be captured which is where Bob Houck comes in. Bob had the task of monitoring the wire cage that was put around one of the feeders hanging from the porch eave. Once a hummingbird entered the cage and was drinking from the feeder, Bob pulled the line that dropped the door on the cage. He then carefully collected the bird from the cage and put it in a mesh bag that was taken to the table where the Sargeants went through their checklist with every single bird. Mr. Sargeant would then place the hummingbird in the palm of a hand where the bird rested comfortably for several or more seconds and then flew away. You know what they say, "A bird in the hand is better than two in the bush." And while this experience was brief, it is one I will always remember.

The afternoon was spent in search of dragonflies and damselflies at Cooks Slough Wetlands. A variety of common species were spotted along with a new species that wasn't on their current list. As an added bonus, our guide knew butterflies and birds, too!

Our Nature Quest experience concluded with a Sunset Bat Tour. No, we didn't actually tour the bat cave, but we did witness millions of Mexican Free-Tailed Bats, a subspecies of the Brazilian Free-Tailed Bat, ascend into the evening sky at sunset. Located at Frio Cave near Concan, this is the second largest bat population in the world and the largest bat population in the world open to the public. Amidst the swirling bats, we even saw a couple of Red-Tailed Hawks skillfully snatch bats in the air for an evening meal.

Our personal quest Friday morning before heading home was to see a hummingbird nest with two babies that was spotted in a tree at a local restaurant. Armed with what we thought were good directions, we set out to find the nest.

After about 30 minutes, we gave up and asked someone to show us where it was. We were in the right area, but without super powers it was almost impossible to see it due to its coloration and tiny size. Others had witnessed the mother feeding the babies but we weren't that lucky. I was just thrilled to see the nest, which was a first-time experience for me.

Our first Nature Quest adventure was definitely worthy of an A+ and we plan to return next year. So if you're looking for an opportunity to have fun and learn from world-class experts about native plants, wildflowers, butterflies, insects, birds, bats and mammals, Nature Quest will not disappoint you with its many field trips, workshops, seminars and evening programs. Located in the southwest corner of the Edwards Plateau, this area is known for picturesque limestone hills carved into canyons by the crystal clear waters of the Sabinal, Frio and Nueces Rivers. It is home to diverse vegetation, spectacular wildflower displays, monumental trees on the National Registry of Big Trees, abundant wildlife, lovely butterflies and many rare and endangered bird species. To experience the "mini" version of this event, the Texas Hill Country River Region will hold its Second Annual Fall Nature Quest September 14-16, 2007. For more information, visit http://www.thcrr.com/static/index.cfm?contentID=29.

Ramona Urbanek

The Grapevine

July 14 and 15 — Austin Pond Society (From Ken Harder, Austin Pond Society) — This year is going to be so much fun, and we have such diversity. This is the 13th annual Austin Pond Society Pond Tour and is held the 14th and 15th of July from 9:00 am - 5:00 pm each day. Best information can be found on our website www.austinpondsociety.org . Wristbands (your entrance ticket) will be available for sale starting June 18 at our regular 7:00 pm monthly meeting at Zilker Botanical Gardens and then June 19 on our website and at select Water Gardening Retailers, *Hill Country Water Gardens, Emerald Gardens* plus *the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center*. Advance wristbands (June 18-July 13) are $12.50 and include all ponds both days. Wristbands will be $15.00 the days of the events and can be purchased at any pond. Maps will be downloadable from our website starting June 19. This year we have 30 ponds total, including the very popular mini night tour on Saturday night from 7:00 – 11:00 pm. We have ponds in Georgetown, Lake Travis, Cedar Park, Leander, Round Rock, Pflugerville, Wells Branch, Northwest Hills, Westlake, Lost Creek, the 78704, Sunset Valley and South Austin, and other neighborhoods. Ponds range in size from 100 gallons up to 9,000 gallons and have been built by DIY pond owners and professional pond builders. Pond owners will be present at all ponds to answer questions. We will have special displays by members of the Austin Bonsai

Society set up at selected ponds to show how the two gardening specialties complement each other. And as a bonus this year, the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center will be one of our showcase ponds on Sunday July 15th from 12:00 pm - 5:30 pm, and is included in the price of a wristband.

Of course the tour is all about introducing people to water gardening at whatever level they're ready to take the plunge. The ponds are about half homeowner and half professionally built this year. 25 of the ponds have never been on tour before and there are some truly spectacular ponds and water features that are rarely made available to the public. Our map and brochure will be a valuable tool for deciding which ones to see.

The Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center Nature Nights
July 12, 19, 26 at 6 p.m. to 9 p.m.
The Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center
Admission: $1
Info Phone #: 512-292-4100
Enjoy habitat hikes throughout the gardens, discovery stations, crafts and presentations by experts and learn about Central Texas snakes, lizards, spiders and raptors.

Monday, July 23 - Club Meeting. Austin Butterfly Forum monthly meeting at Zilker Botanical Garden Center, 7:00 p.m. Program by Mike Overton, a well-known tour leader on nature trips all over the United States and in Mexico: "Butterflies of Northeast Mexico" Open to the public.

The Fifteenth Annual Texas Bamboo Festival will be held on Saturday and Sunday, August 25 and 26 at Zilker Botanical Garden, Austin. Sponsored by the Texas Bamboo Society, the event will celebrate the wonders of bamboo with presentations, demonstrations and education information, including Bamboo 101, a Bamboo Kite Making Workshop led by Greg Kono, and Bamboos of Southeast Asia presented by Harry Simmons. Bamboo plants and crafts will be for sale. For additional information, call (512) 929-9565 or visit www.bamboocentral.net.

Austin Organic Gardeners meet at 7 p.m. on the second Monday of each month at the Zilker Botanical Gardens in Austin. For more information, visit www.main.org/aog.

The Purple Gate Herb Farm
Saturday, Oct. 20
7376 County Road 309
Caldwell, TX 77836

8:30 AM leave from car pool location. Return to Austin 4-5 PM
Cost: $15 per person which includes lunch. Plus $5.00 to car pool driver.
The Purple Gate Herb Farm is owned and operated by Bud and Mary Mills near the town of Caldwell, in south-central Texas. They grow herbs mingled with wildflowers in theme gardens bordered by native woods. They strive to provide quality plants to their customers. They provide extensive information about

each plant to help customers enjoy growing and using each plant.

Field trip includes a guided tour of the theme gardens (ancient, culinary, medicinal, myth and magic and tea), a raku pottery demonstration, and an herb based lunch. There will be time to tour the grounds and shop at the gift shop.

Your $15.00 check is your reservation. Check must be received by Oct. 12. Make check to: Rosalie Russell, 2401 Spring Creek Dr., Austin, TX 78704. Minimum of 10 people required for this trip. An email to participants about five days before the trip will include the last minute details, location of car pool and directions to the herb farm.

Let's have a great, fun day in the country!

Rosalie Russell
VP Education
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Closing the Garden Gate...

Last weekend my 80-something year old neighbor was mowing his grass when I heard him scream. I was working in my front yard and stopped in my tracks to check on him (it's not every day you hear a grown man scream). He was fine – though his heart was beating a little faster because of the snake he had just encountered. I tried to relocate the harmless garden snake to my yard where he would be more appreciated but it beat a trail into the Asian jasmine (I'm sure it's heart was beating a little faster too). Seems like every other day I read or hear about people having snakes in their yards (or ponds) they would like to have removed or worse – take a hoe to. Why is it so hard to convince some people they should be happy a snake (non-venomous) has made their yard it's home?

Here are a few facts I found about Texas snakes:

The Lone Star State is, undeniably, a cornucopia of snake diversity. We boast a stunning 68 species of snakes. If you include both species and subspecies in that number, it gives you a grand total of 115 - the highest number in all of the United States. The vast majority of Texas' snakes are non-venomous and completely harmless. Only 15% of the total number are venomous and should be treated with caution and respect. The venomous varieties can be grouped into four basic categories: coral snakes, copperheads, cottonmouths (also known as water moccasins), and rattlesnakes.

Snakes are comparatively long-lived. Even small snakes may live as long as 12 years. Large species may live to a ripe old age of 40 years or even longer.

There are no snake vegetarians. Depending on the species, prey items consist of slugs, worms, insects of all kinds, crustaceans, fish, amphibians, other reptiles, birds and/or mammals. As predators, they are invaluable for their

role in maintaining the balance of nature by helping to keep populations of their prey in check. Snakes are especially important in the control of rodents.

An animal that has venom is called "venomous." An animal that would make you sick if you ate it is "poisonous." Only a small number of snakes have venom. So although some people refer to those snakes as "poisonous," technically, they mean venomous.

I'm going to keep trying to convince people snakes are what
Martha Stewart would call a "good thing" and hope you will too!

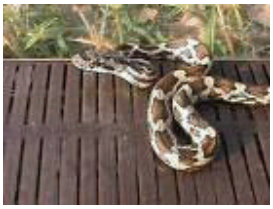
A Little Garden (Snake) Trivia…

Snakes use several methods of reproduction. Which of the following is NOT used by snakes to have babies? (answer below)

a. lay eggs and leave them to hatch on their own
b. female keeps the eggs in her body - babies hatch out and are then born
c. lay eggs, then coil around them and shiver to help them incubate the eggs
d. lay eggs and then return to them to help feed the babies

In closing…

I have no fear of losing my life - if I have to save a koala or a crocodile or a kangaroo or a snake, I will save it. — Steve Irwin



answer: (d)

Rebecca Matthews

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