Ruby Crush Tomato Named Texas Superstar Plant, April 1-7

Ruby crush, a determinate grape tomato variety with a long-standing reputation for performance and taste, has been named the newest Texas Superstar plant. Larry Stein, Ph.D., Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service horticulturist and Texas Superstar executive board member, Uvalde, said the variety has performed exceptionally well in field trials under less-than-ideal growing conditions around the state. Stein said the variety has been a top-performing tomato plant in field trials over the past several years, despite it being a grape variety. Ruby Crush has also performed well in taste tests over the years, including at the San Antonio Rodeo, where it was named the 2021 Rodeo Tomato. “It’s been extremely consistent since day one,” he said. “It performs even where fields or planting conditions are poor. Other varieties don’t do that year upon year.” To be designated a Texas Superstar, a plant must perform well for growers throughout the state. Texas Superstars must also be easy to propagate, ensuring the plants are widely available and reasonably priced.

Ruby Crush is a truly determinate plant that can reach 3-4 feet tall, Stein said. The plants are perennial but are grown as an annual in Texas due to the cold. They perform best in gardens when grown in a cage, but are also ideal for containers. Ruby Crush can spill over the top of a 4-foot cage when caged and adequately fertilized, Stein said. The compact plants produce trusses of tomatoes, which can be 1.5 inches wide by 1.25 inches long and weigh half an ounce, roughly the weight of a AAA battery. The plant is highly resistant to several fungal diseases, including fusarium crown and wilt; root rot and tomato mosaic virus 0-2. Plants show medium resistance to gray leaf spot. It is best to plant Ruby Crush tomato plants in the spring but they also can be planted in mid-summer for fall harvests. Stein said white flies are problematic and can hinder production later in the growing season. Fruit matures early, often 60 days from transplanting, Stein said. The tomatoes are scarlet red, oblong and weigh about half an ounce, with a flavorful sweet taste. Tomatoes do continue to ripen after being picked and are typically harvested when they start to “break” or change color. “They really do produce nice clusters of grape-shaped tomatoes,” he said. “You don’t necessarily have to pick the whole cluster if they don’t ripen all at once.”

Ruby Crush requires full sun for optimal fruit production and tolerates any soil that drains well, Stein said. Stein said Ruby Crush have produced under various field conditions under sub-optimal treatments, such as poor soil and no fertilizer. But, he said, plants perform and produce fruit best when side-dressed with slow-release fertilizers. “They do load up with fruit when properly fertilized,” he said. “Ruby Crush performs better than other varieties under less-than-ideal conditions, but it can be really spectacular with fertilization and in a cage.” The red tomato is listed on most nutritional lists as a superfood. It is packed with the antioxidant

vitamins A and C, potassium and the B vitamins for heart health, and above all a powerful carotenoid called lycopene.

Texas Superstar is a registered trademark owned by Texas A&M AgriLife Research. Plants are designated by the Texas Superstar executive board, which comprises nine horticulturists from AgriLife Research, AgriLife Extension and Texas Tech University in Lubbock.

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Ruby Crush grape tomato variety was named a Texas Superstar plant for its consistent performance in trails around the state (Texas A&M AgriLife photo by Mike Arnold)

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Texas Crawfish Production Steady, Prices Higher, April 8-14

Texas crawfish production remained steady, but consumers should expect higher prices this season as demand continues to grow, according to a Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service expert. Todd Sink, Ph.D., AgriLife Extension aquaculture specialist and director of the AgriLife Extension Aquatic Diagnostics Lab, Bryan-College Station, said the crawfish industry continues to thrive in Texas and demand continues to rise across the state. Sink said crawfish have fared better in Texas than Louisiana this year. Sizes were below average in Louisiana this year due to weather, but crawfish have been consistently bigger in Texas during the early season. Drought conditions and the impacts of winter freezes were worse in Louisiana production areas compared to Southeast Texas, he said. Dry conditions forced crawfish to remain in burrows for long periods, which meant they were foraging and growing less. Winter freezes in early winter also killed back vegetation, which compounded their lack of winter foraging. Producers around Beaumont, however, were not seeing smaller sizes, he said. “Our crawfish are bigger and bringing better prices,” Sink said. “Jumbo crawfish demand premium prices and could be close to $1 more per pound compared to regular grade crawfish. It also takes more crawfish per pound when they are smaller.”

Texas ranks second in crawfish production, but it is far behind Louisiana, which produced 150 million pounds on around 250,000 acres in 2019. About 60%-70% of crawfish consumed in Texas come from Louisiana, Sink said. Texas production is hard to pin down due to the lack of official reporting, but Sink believes producers average between 750-800 pounds per acre, or 7.125 million to 7.6 million pounds of crawfish from about 9,500 acres annually. “The Texas crawfish industry is doing well, but production remained static this year,” he said. “We went through good expansion years, but no new farms have come in over the past year. We’re kind of running out of acres suitable for crawfish.” Sink said crawfish farming has tried to move beyond Southeast Texas but that sandy, acidic soils and lack of water proved inhospitable to production. Fortunately, he said, Texas producers in areas suitable for production are making the most of their acres. Around 60% of Texas crawfish acres are dual-purpose flooded rice fields that provide habitat for crawfish farming until rice is planted. Those acres produce around 650 pounds per acre of crawfish until they are shut down for rice planting. Acres dedicated solely to crawfish can produce 900-950 pounds per acre and can be harvested a month to six weeks longer than rice acres, Sink said. Sink believes rice variety introductions over recent years have helped dual-purpose producers harvest crawfish deeper into the season. “The shorter-season rice varieties give producers an edge,” he said. “The beginning of the season pays the farm bills. They want to be first while prices are high, but the crawfish at the end of the season are the profit. Extending harvest a week or two can add 70-100 pounds per acre.”

Sink said crawfish lovers should expect to pay higher prices than last year. Price increases are associated with the inflationary pressures that have led to higher overall food

costs. The per-pound price paid for crawfish is influenced on where and when consumers purchase them, Sink said. Consumers closer to crawfish production in Louisiana and Southeast Texas will pay less due to lower shipping costs. Early season crawfish can be expensive, but the prices typically peak during Lent, the 40-day period between Ash Wednesday and the Holy Saturday before Easter. Last year, live crawfish in College Station were $4 per pound, or $120 per bag, on the first day of Lent. Prices were even higher in metropolitan areas like Austin, San Antonio and Dallas, he said. Live crawfish prices routinely pushed beyond $5 per pound during peak demand last year. Live crawfish were priced at $4.75 per pound in College Station in January and are now $2.97 per pound, Sink said. Boiled crawfish were $8.99 per pound. In San Antonio, live crawfish were unavailable at numerous retailers already, and boiled crawfish were $9.99 per pound. Live crawfish in Dallas were $3.97-$4.99 per pound and unavailable in some locations. Prices begin to fall after Easter, Sink said. “Demand continues to increase each year, and I don’t see that slowing down,” he said. “I am just worried we’re running out of suitable production acres and that the ability to meet demand that grows year after year will push prices higher and higher.”

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Beneficial Garden Insect ID, April 15-21

Planting a seed and watching a garden grow can be one of the most rewarding experiences. However, harmful insects can cause damage and destroy your crop within days and even in some cases overnight. The best tool for managing insects is to actively scout for individuals. Scouting allows you to apply management practices to reduce populations of harmful insects before an infestation and destruction of your garden. Scouting also allows you to ID what insects are present so you don’t waste your money applying insecticides on insects that do not harm your plants. In fact, the vast majority of insects in your garden either don’t harm your plants or may be beneficial by predating on harmful insects. Today’s article is going to focus on describing and helping you ID some of the most common beneficial insects seen in Polk County gardens.

Lacewings

Can be common and are greenish to brownish in color with a length around ¾ inch. Wings are transparent. Lacewings nickname is aphid lions as they hunt and kill aphids and other small insects.

Lady Bug

This very popular and well know beetle is one of the most beneficial insects found in gardens. Over 475 species occur in North America and can come in a variety of colors. Both adults and larvae are predators of aphids, mealy bugs, mites, and scale insects.

Parasitic Wasp

These small wasps are less than 1/8 inch in length but don't let size fool you. Parasitic wasp have a lifecycle that is right out of a horror movie. Parasitic wasp larvae feed and pupate within a host insect such as aphids, whiteflies, scale insects, leaf miners and caterpillars. All that is left behind is the harmful insects corps with a circular hole. Some species larvae feed on the outside of the host by attaching to it and forming white cocoons.

Assassin Bugs

Assassin bugs vary from brown to brightly colored. Length is between ½ to 1 inch. The head is elongated with a beak that is used to inject venom into insects like flies, mosquitos, and aphids. There are over 160 species in North America and can cause a painful bite if handled.

Wheel Bug

Wheel bug is a type of assassin bug that is know for the crest on it thorax (middle section).

Big Eyed Bug

As it names suggest this insect is know for its big eyes. Big eyed bug favorite food is cinch bugs, small caterpillars, and others soft bodied insects that can be found on the soil surface.

Earthworms

Earthworms are not an insect but are worth mentioning. Many people mistake earthworm castings as either damaging their soil/plants or castings are a sign of a harmful insect. Earthworms are beneficial as they aerate and reduce compaction in the soil.

This is by no means a complete list of beneficial insects found in the garden. Other beneficial insects include spiders, earwigs, tachinid flies, dragonflies, bees, praying mantids, and butterflies to name a few. If you are unsure of what insects you have, you can email a picture to the extension office or drop off a specimen.

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Summer Food Plots, April 22-28

Articles April 2023

I am going to begin this article by asking a question. Which season do you think is the hardest on deer in Polk County from both food availability and stress. I suspect most of you would answer during winter. Which is a logical answer since many plants are dormant. However, for the forest of east Texas summer months can be the hardest time of the year for deer. When you look at the four seasons during spring, forbs, wildflowers, and other broad leaf plants that provide good nutrition are actively growing. During fall the mast (acorns and other nuts) crop fall from trees providing plentiful food. Plants are obviously not growing during the winter, however many of our spring forbs begin germinating during winter providing some browse. Summer months, especially July and August can be hard on deer because spring annual forbs have withered in the summer heat and the fall mast crop has yet to drop. This means the majority of browse available is from woody trees and many of east Texas tree species are ranked as low-quality browse especially in a pine plantation.

The main benefit of summer food plots is providing high quality browse during the summer months. In addition, during summer deer experience stress from does lactating, fawns growing, and bucks developing antlers. Summer food plots provide supplemental nutrition during this time. During drought years this benefit increases as native browse dries up. However, the downside of summer food plots is they also need adequate rainfall and if your native browse is struggling from lack of rain your food plot will be also unless irrigation is provided which is not common in east Texas.

There are several factors you need to consider when planning summer food plots. For summer food plots, bottom sites with deep soils or preferred over hill sides with sandy soils that will have lower soil moisture. This is to mitigate decreased rainfall during the summer months. An ideal summer food plot site would be along a creek or small stream valley with deep loamy soils. One large food plot is less desirable over several smaller food plots scattered through the property. Food plots can also get too large to where deer utilization decreases towards the middle. Deer require cover to escape from predators and will utilize a food plot that is small and narrow over one that is wide with cover being a few hundred yards from the middle. A general rule of thumb is to plant 1-3% of your land in food plots. So, if you have 100 acres of land you should plant 1-3 acres of food plots. I would recommend on 100 acres to plant three 1 acre food plots over one 3 acre food plot. For summer food plots memorial day is a good target planting date with anytime between May 1 and June 30 being acceptable. An ideal food plot plant species would produce a large yield and will also be preferred browse by deer. In other words, we don’t want a plant that has a large yield but is not browsed or a plant that is preferred by deer but is low yielding.

The following are the steps needed to plan and plant a warms season food plot in Polk County. Conduct a soil test no later than April to determine what nutrients are in the soil so you can apply the right type and amount of fertilizer. I recommend contacting your feed store a month or two before you want to plant to ensure they have your seeds in stock when you are ready to plant. Some year seeds can be in short supply. Seed beds should be prepared by applying herbicide for a chemical burn, if necessary, followed by tillage work 2-3 weeks before planting. Fertilizer can be applied at or right before planting. A broadcast spreader or grain drill can be used to plant the seed. If using a broadcast spreader lightly drag the soil after spreading the seeds to achieve good seed to soil contact. Again, Memorial Day is a good target planting date.

During the summer of 2021 the extension office conducted a result demonstration to determine production and deer preference of five different species commonly planted in summer food plots. This included millet, lespedeza, cowpeas, sudan sorghum, and lab lab. The key takeaway from the demonstration is a mixture of species should be planted in summer food plots to take into consideration that different species grow at different rates, reach maturity at different times, and deer preference varies based off plant maturity and stage of growth.

Recommended seeding mixture for Polk County summer food plots.

Cowpeas 30%

Millet 30%

Lab Lab 25%

Sudan 10%

Lespedaza 5%

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Chicken Breeds for the Small Flock Owner, April 29-May 5

Raising a small flock of chickens can be both an enjoyable and rewarding experience. Many homeowners and small landowners raise small flocks as a hobby and to provide homegrown eggs and meat. If you have been raising chickens for a while you have likely

experimented with different breeds and have discovered which breed works best for your growing conditions and expectations. However, for new flock owners a trip to the feed store to purchase chicks can be an overwhelming experience due to the numerous breeds available.

Before choosing a breed, you must first consider the goals for your flock. Do you want chickens that produce eggs efficiently or have a high meat yield? Or do you prefer a breed that can produce eggs and be put in a pot for supper? Chickens that produce eggs proficiently are called egg breeds, while breeds that result in high meat yields are called meat breeds. Breeds that can produce a reputable amount of eggs and meat but to a lesser degree are called dual purpose breeds. Also, there are breeds that are kept for ornamental value due to their unique plumage or other characteristics.

Egg breeds can be divided up between white egg layers, brown egg layers, and tinted egg layers. Leghorns are the most prolific white egg layer breed and are typically white in plumage but less common color varieties such as red and bluff exist. Other white layer breeds include California Whites, Production Blacks, and White Faced Black Spanish. Most of the more common brown egg layer breeds are considered dual purpose breeds. However, there are some cross breeds available such as Production Reds that are very proficient brown egg layers. Popular tinted egg layer breeds are Araucanas (Easter Eggers), Black Sumatras, and Indian Jungle Fowl.

Meat birds have been bred to maximize breast meat yield. Meat birds are called broilers and are decedents of the Cornish Game Hen Breed. The white feather variety of broilers are the most popular, but black and red feather varieties are also available. Cornish Game Hen can still be purchased, but you can expect birds that produce meat yield at a slower rate then modern day broilers.

Dual purpose breeds are some of the most popular breeds for small flock owners. They will provide a steady source of brown eggs, but produce enough breast meat to be worth processing. The most popular dual purpose breeds are Barred Plymouth Rock, Black Australorp, Delaware, Dominique, Jersey Black Giant, New Hampshire Red, Rhode Island Red, Silver Laced Wyandotte, and White Plymouth Rock.

There is a plethora of unique or rare varieties that are kept for ornamental values by small flock owners. Some of the most common breeds are Polish Chickens or crested chickens that have a crest of feathers on the head. Brahmas are large attractive birds with feathers covering the legs compared to Naked Neck that have no feathers on their neck. Lastly, bantam breeds are miniature varieties that look exactly like their larger counterpart.

Now with a little bit of knowledge on chicken breeds you will be able to make an educated purchase when visiting the feed store to start your own small flock.

Delaware *Polish Crested*

Images from Livestock Conservancy

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