

Tips To Prevent Barn Swallow Nests This Spring, May 6-12

Whether you hate the mess barn swallows leave or enjoy being able to watch them up close, a [Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service](#) expert encourages you to plan for these birds' arrival now. The migratory spring season for swallows started March 1 and barn swallows will typically enter the southern U.S. in mid-March to mid-April. Of the eight species of swallows in North America, barn and cliff swallows are typically considered to be the most problematic since they build mud nests attached to houses, barns and other structures. Barn swallows tend to nest as single pairs, but cliff swallows can nest in colonies composed of up to several hundred pairs. Swallows need a suitable surface to build a nest, typically an overhang or covered ledge, and a supply of mud they deem the proper consistency for nest building. If your property meets these building requirements, odds are good swallows will be back year after year unless you intervene. AgriLife Extension's Liz Tidwell, a small acreage wildlife program specialist in the [Department of Rangeland, Wildlife and Fisheries Management](#) in the [Texas A&M College of Agriculture and Life Sciences](#), Uvalde, said if you don't want barn swallows on your property, then you must immediately intervene before any nests are built and occupied. The Migratory Bird Treaty Act, passed in 1918, makes it a federal crime to hunt, kill, capture, sell or otherwise hurt them, which includes destroying nests in use. "The main reason people want to remove barn swallow nests is aesthetic. Having mud nests on the side of your house or structure and the resulting bird droppings underneath isn't appealing," Tidwell said. "Too many nests can also become a health concern." Tidwell said nests by entryways may also be a nuisance when swallows act territorial and "divebomb" homeowners to protect their nest and young. "Luckily swallows are not as aggressive as blue jays or mockingbirds and swallows won't peck at your head like they will," she said. "And often once swallows get used to your presence and know you aren't going to harm the nest, they will stop swooping down on you as you come and go from your structure."

How to prevent barn swallow nests

Tidwell shared advice for preventing the swallows many Texans consider unwanted and pesky guests.

- Use netting or wire mesh hung diagonally to cover areas where swallows could build nests — typically anyplace like an eave or where a roof and wall meet.
- Surfaces can also be covered with materials hung vertically to prevent birds from getting to their preferred building sites.
- Bird spike sticks and bird barriers can be purchased and installed to prevent birds from building nests.

- For places where there is an open entry way, vinyl plastic hung in overlapping strips may be used. This is essentially a doorway curtain similar to what you may see in a grocery store for workers in refrigerated areas.
- Knock down old nests that are empty. Birds will reuse nests from previous years if available.
- When you see a new nest starting to be constructed, knock down the mud daily until the birds give up on their build. Once a bird starts spending time in the nest, even if it is not yet completed, the law says you'll be stuck with the nest until it is empty again.

What to avoid when preventing barn swallows

- No repellents are known to be effective.
- No toxicants are registered for use.
- Trapping is not allowed.
- Shooting is not allowed.
- Barn swallows are not easily frightened so trying to scare them away using any method is usually ineffective.

How to remove a barn swallow nest

Old, empty nests and the mud for nests birds are beginning to construct can be removed several ways.

- A pressure washer or hose.
- A pole.
- A scraper or chisel can be used, however if you are getting close enough to a nest to use those tools, protective gear should be used. Gloves and a mask should be worn — if you have a respirator or leftover N95s now is the time to put them to use.
- Use caution. Blood sucking parasites and mites can survive in nests long after the birds have left, even as long as three years. You do not want to come in direct contact with a nest potentially filled with parasites, mites and feces.

Four reasons why you might want to welcome swallows

- Swallows eat the insects that many people consider pests. Essentially, they are providing a free ecological service — catching insects for you. And the more mouths to feed, the fewer insects you'll have.
- The proximity of nests to doorways and windows makes for easy bird watching.

- The educational experience of seeing the baby birds start as eggs then grow from hatchlings to nestlings to fledglings. At the juvenile stage, they will leave the nest. The birds have an extended breeding season, and two or more clutches are common.
- They're just passing through. They'll be gone when the weather gets chilly again.

With a breeding season starting late March, nests will soon be built and occupied. Now is the time to act—whether that means hanging out a welcome sign or discouraging the birds from taking up residence. “Swallows have a tendency to return to previous nesting locations,” Tidwell said. “So, if you’ve had birds in the past, odds are good you’ll have them again.”



Now is the time to take action to prevent barn swallows from building new nests or returning to unoccupied ones. (Stock photon by Phillip Ackermann/Pexels)

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Chill Hours Produce Mixed Results For Texas Peach Producers, May 13-19

Winter and early spring weather related to chill hours has led to mixed results for Texas peach producers, according to [Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service](#) experts. Parts of the state are reporting good fruit sets despite drought, while other areas are reporting late freeze damage and inadequate chill hours that have cut into potential peach yields. Jim Kamas, AgriLife Extension fruit specialist, Fredericksburg, said weather conditions like drought and insufficient chill hours worked against fruit tree production in the Hill Country this winter. Kamas said AgriLife Extension has been tracking chill hours – hours at or below 45 degrees after the last frost – in the Hill Country for more than 20 years, and by traditional measurements trees should receive around 830 hours of chilling. But the response from trees indicates they received around 530 chill hours. Tree response to this season’s chill hours in the Hill Country has been abysmal. Trees were slow to leaf out and, while blooms looked normal, Kamas said trees shed them, which is a sign of incomplete bud differentiation. Some fruit is forming, but Kamas said he was uncertain whether they would progress or fall off. “Things don’t look good,” he said. “I don’t want to say there will be no peaches, but we’re looking at 30% of a typical season at best.”

Fruit trees, like peaches, apples and even blackberries, depend on cool weather in the winter to promote proper physiological growth in the spring. If plants do not receive the required number of chill hours, they can be slow to leaf out, which typically leads to poorly developed fruit or no fruit at all. Chill hours begin to add up after the first freeze each fall, Kamas said. Trees go dormant for winter, but chill hours promote hormones that dilute growth inhibitors throughout the winter and prepare the plant to break dormancy and begin new growth, bloom and set fruit. Proper chill hours trigger good and well-timed leaf and flower bud development. A lack of chill hours can lead to poorly developed buds and flowers that can have a cascading effect leading to stunted or misshaped fruit to no fruit at all. Leaves help trees produce energy and protect limbs from sun scald, but multiple seasons of inadequate chill hours can kill plants. Kamas said the puzzling reaction to temperatures by fruit trees this winter is backed by some research that has shown different temperature ranges have variable impacts on the trees. Temperatures 38 degrees to 48 degrees are more efficient than temperatures above or below that range. The research also shows temperatures at or below freezing do not impact a tree’s chill requirements. “It makes sense because we had below-freezing temperatures for a week during that early winter ice storm,” he said. “That is about 300 hours that we traditionally count but likely had no effect. Most winters these freeze events balance out over a winter, but that didn’t happen.”

George Philley, Ph.D., owner of Philley Peach orchard in Overton and retired AgriLife Extension plant pathologist, said the lack of fruit set and leaf formation on several varieties

suggests his trees received similarly inadequate chill hours. His low-chill varieties suffered another setback during the late freeze in March. Philley said those trees had dime- to quarter-sized peaches, but that two nights with below-freezing temperatures appear to have caused complete fruit losses. “Last year, and this year, they recorded around 1,000 chill hours at the Texas A&M AgriLife center in Overton,” he said. “I had about one-third of a crop last year, and it looks like it might be the same this year. Varieties that I thought were not going to make a crop did last year, but 30% of what you are hoping for is not good.” Bill Holcombe, AgriLife Extension agent in Clay County, said peach growers reported plenty of chill hours but also some light late freeze damage, leading to 45% to 80% fruit set survival rates. Higher losses occurred in orchards that received less maintenance from growers. Some producers burned piles of hay and brush within their orchards to keep the frost from damaging fruit, he said. “Most of the damage was in lower lying pockets, but they were very positive about their fruit sets and their crops’ progress so far,” Holcomb said. Larry Stein, Ph.D., AgriLife Extension horticulturist, Uvalde, said low- to mid-chill varieties grown in the Winter Garden region set fruit well. Some fruit appears slightly elongated, which is a sign of not quite enough chilling. Growers were thinning trees to reduce the crop load to avoid overcropping, improve fruit size and allow trees to bounce back for next season. Drought conditions did not affect fruit set, but Stein said orchards need subsoil moisture levels to be replenished to reach ideal fruit size and for trees’ long-term health. “My biggest concern is the dry weather,” he said. “Most producers irrigate, but irrigation is supplemental at best and can never replace rainfall. Producers are busy thinning before the pits harden to get the size increase and doing weed control because weeds steal moisture, but I would think it is going to be a typical season for the growers around here.”



Adequate chill hours allow for healthy blooms that translate into good fruit sets. Unfortunately, much of the state’s peach-producing areas received inadequate chill hours that will greatly impact fruit yields. (Texas A&M AgriLife photo by Michael Miller)

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Adding Native Plants to Your Landscape, May 20-26

Over the past couple months, I have received numerous phone calls from homeowners wanting to add native plants to their landscaping. For this reason, I felt like now would be a good time to review the benefits of planting natives, how to plant natives, and what to plant for Polk County.

Why plant natives? To start many homeowners, get frustrated with St. Augustine or other nonnative turf grass species that require intensive management and higher inputs (fertilizer, herbicide, etc.) The higher inputs required for turfgrass species concern a growing number of homeowners as society has become more aware of environmental issues caused by excessive use of fertilizer and herbicides. It should be noted that when fertilizer and herbicide is applied according to label and done in a professional manner environmental issues are negligible. The issue is most homeowners and even landscapers have little knowledge and technical skills to apply fertilizer and herbicides appropriately. Are we not all to blame? I am sure many of you reading this article have applied a bag of fertilizer and just assumed it was an appropriate amount for your soil or applied more herbicide than needed because you wanted to make sure the weed would die. While water is typically not an issue in east Texas, homeowners in more arid locations are choosing drought hardy natives as they do not require irrigation during drought periods. Lastly, native plants attract a variety of wildlife, especially pollinators. Many homeowners have added pollinator gardens to help curve decreasing number of pollinators due to loss of habitat. Lastly, when done appropriately native landscaping is very attractive and can exponentially increase the benefit your landscape has to the environment.

How do you plant natives? First you must acquire seeds or collect plants. Seeds are available from several different dealers across the state. A quick google search of "Texas native seeds for sale" will allow you to shop from several dealers. Another popular option is to collect seeds from wild plants. This method is popular because some seeds are hard to find for sale. Before collecting wild seeds make sure you have landowner permission and are not breaking any federal, state, or local laws. Keep in mind that not all natives are created equal. Just because a plant is native to Texas doesn't mean it is appropriate for Polk County. Make sure it is a native

plant for Polk County. Also, widespread natives like little bluestem can be found statewide, but varieties exist. Little bluestem from central Texas will not thrive in Polk County. When possible, purchase seeds that were sourced from east Texas such as pineywoods little bluestem instead of central Texas little bluestem. Planting native seeds does not require mechanical equipment like drills and tractors. However, it does make it easier. In a small location you can prepare the seed bed with a tiller or hand tools. After preparing the soil spread the seed evenly over the soil. Native seeds do not need to be buried deep. ¼ inch deep is more than enough and good soil to seed contact is a must. This can be done by using a garden rake or even a limb to rake soil over the seeds. Next you will need to pack the soil with either a lawn roller or stomping your feet. For wildflowers the best time to plant is in the fall, grasses can be planted throughout the year but will germinate when temperatures are above 65 degrees.

What do I plant? The list of potential natives is nearly endless but below are my general recommendations for Polk County.

Grasses for full Sun: pineywoods little bluestem, purple top, Indian grass, bushy bluestem, split bread bluestem, broom sedge bluestem, Virginia wildrye

Grasses for partial shade: bushy bluestem, eastern gamagrass, split bread bluestem, pinneywoods little bluestem, broomsege bluestem, purple top, Virginia wildrye

Grasses for full shade: inland sea oats, longleaf woodoats, Virginia wildrye, eastern gamagrass, purple top

Wildflowers: turk's cap, rattlesnake master, maximillian sunflower, prairie blazing star, lance leaved coreopsis, scarlet sage, butterfly milkweed, green milkweed, antelope horn, spiderwort, blue mistflower, American beautyberry, sandyland bluebonnet

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Nuts and Seeds, May 27- June 2

How well do you know pecans? What about peanuts? I bet many of you have never heard of chia seeds? For this week's article we are going to dive into nuts and seeds through a series of questions to test your knowledge.

1. Which nut/seed is a legume and is part of the root system of the plant?
 - a. Cashews
 - b. Pecans
 - c. Peanuts
2. Which superfood contains more heart healthy Omega-3s than any type of fish including salmon?
 - a. Pistachios
 - b. Chia Seeds
 - c. Pumpkin Seeds
3. Which nut/seed is associated with a reduced risk of stomach, breast, lung, prostate, and colon cancers?
 - a. Pecans
 - b. Walnuts
 - c. Pumpkin Seeds
4. Which nut/seed is a member of the mint family with its origin being Central America and was staple of Aztec diet?
 - a. Chia Seeds
 - b. Walnuts
 - c. Cashews
5. Texas leads the nation as the 3rd largest growers of which of these crops?
 - a. Pecans
 - b. Walnuts
 - c. Pumpkins
6. Which nut/seed is associated with better brain function including improving memory?
 - a. Peanuts
 - b. Pistachios
 - c. Walnuts
7. Which nut/seed is native to Brazil and grows best in tropical climates with temperatures no lower than 50 degrees?
 - a. Peanuts
 - b. Chia Seeds
 - c. Cashews
8. One serving of which nut/seed will provide you with almost half of your daily need of manganese which is essential for bone health?
 - a. Pecans
 - b. Pistachios
 - c. Walnuts
9. Which nut/seed grows best in arid desert climates.? For this reason, California, Arizona, and New Mexico contain 100% of the orchards that produce this nut.
 - a. Walnuts
 - b. Pistachios
 - c. Peanuts
10. Which nut/seed is the lowest in calories and fat?

- a. Pecans
 - b. Cashews
 - c. Pistachios
11. Which nut/seed has over 1,000 varieties and they are commonly named after Native American tribes?
- a. Pecans
 - b. Walnuts
 - c. Cashews
12. Which nut/seed can help to manage blood pressure?
- a. Chia Seeds
 - b. Pumpkin Seeds
 - c. Cashews
13. Texas is home to several native species of which nut/seed?
- a. Walnuts
 - b. Pecans
 - c. Peanuts
14. The healthiest way to eat this type of nut/seed is raw with the skin on. Which nut/seed is this?
- a. Peanuts
 - b. Pumpkin Seeds
 - c. Chia Seeds

Answers:

1) Peanuts 2) Chia Seeds 3) Pumpkins Seeds 4) Chia Seeds 5) Pumpkins 6) Walnuts 7) Cashews 8) Pecans 9) Pistachios 10) Pistachios 11) Pecans 12) Cashews 13) Walnuts 14) Peanuts

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