

Planning A Year-Round Garden, January 6-12

With Christmas behind us and a new year ahead, my mind is making plans for the upcoming garden. Now I'm not one for making resolutions, but I do love to take a look back and then make plans for the future.

I have a smaller sized vegetable garden that fits what my wife and I need. But I've let it go. That rich soil is currently growing a fine patch of bermuda grass. A gardening expert I follow said that you never should let a portion of your garden go untended after a crop is complete. Even if you finish by late summer, you can plant any number of fall and winter cover crops to build the soil and keep unwanted weeds at bay. I have let mine go during the drought last summer and fall and I am planning for a good year ahead.

Let's run through a possible scenario for a year-round garden. Early season vegetables such as onions and potatoes will be followed by traditional spring plants such as peppers, tomatoes, and squash.

As the spring plants play out in the hot, mid-summer months, my goal is to plant heat tolerant purple hull peas and okra. Even if I don't get all the okra harvested, I'll have blooms to enjoy. What I should really focus on is cowpeas. Locally called by their varietal name, 'purple hull peas', these are legumes which fix nitrogen in the soil and actually improve the soil's nitrogen levels.

Lastly, as fall sets in, it will be time to plant greens and cool season crops to carry me through the winter.

Now if you think this plan is a little too simplistic, I would agree. But at the very least, this scenario gives you an idea of where to start. Sit down and study the vegetable varieties that you want to have in your garden. Even with a certain vegetable, you will find shorter and longer "seed to harvest" varieties available.

Additionally, some plants can be let go to extend the season. I know many gardeners that will plant a six pack of tomato's as soon as possible in the spring and harvest from those plants throughout our growing season into the fall. Others insist that replanting a second, fall tomato crop is the best option.

A fun challenge for fall tomato growers is to see how long they can harvest and consume their own tomatoes. Harvesting all the green/unripe tomatoes just before the first killing frost of winter may allow you to eat your homegrown tomatoes into the winter. On years where we've had a late first frost, I have known some to eat their own garden's tomatoes on Christmas day.

Building my soil is another big goal I have for my garden. I suppose I could get a dump truck load of compost delivered, but I'm more of a do-it-yourself kind of guy. We have an abundance of oaks at my house and consequently an abundance of oak leaves.

My goal is to use as many leaves as I can down the middles of my rows. This will serve two roles. First, rows covered in coarse leaves will keep mud at bay when the ground is wet. Second, the leaves in those middles should break down slowly over the growing year to be later tilled in.

In the rows and hills where I plant, I want to add as much composted manure as feasible for me. Bagged, composted manures are available at the better garden stores and make the task of adding it to the garden so much easier. If you know someone who regularly cleans out their manure from horse stalls, cattle pens, chicken coops, or from under rabbit cages, you may be able to get a lot of "product" for a lot of shoveling and very little expense.

Be sure to let any manures age before you add it to your soil. I'm not worried so much about it being too hot, as some would say, but of disease. As much as I'm in favor of manures as fertilizer, there is a very real and present disease factor when manures are not properly aged.

It is a sunny bright day as I write this. I can't wait to put something in the ground in 2024. I think I'll start with onions.

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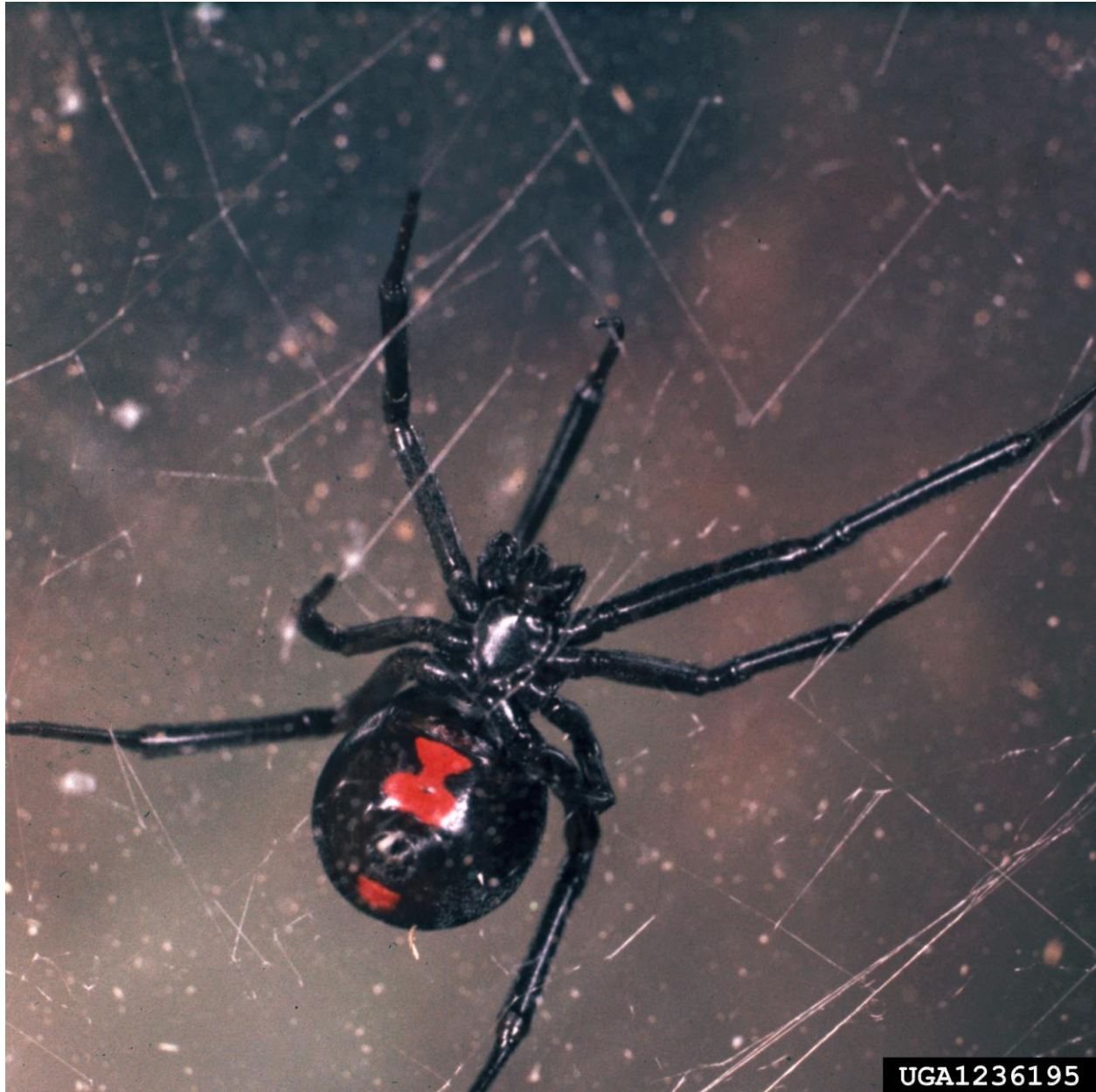
Dangerous Spiders, January 13-19

Texas is home to nearly 900 species of spiders. Out of all those species only two groups of spiders in Texas have venom and fangs large enough to be considered harmful to humans. These two groups are brown recluse spiders (*Loxosceles reculsa*) and black widow spiders (*Latrodectus mactans*). There are 4 different species of black widow spiders found in Texas. While these spiders are harmful to humans, they do not actively seek out humans to bite and to cause harm. They prefer to remain hidden and out of sight and many times they can be found close to homes and around humans and remain unnoticed.

Brown recluse spiders have six eyes arranged in pairs which is a unique characteristic that many other spiders species lack. Body length is quarter to half inch in length and is most well-known for the dark violin shaped mark on the cephalothorax (head section). Recluse spiders seek dark places and are most active at night. They prefer to hide in cracks and crevices where they can hide. Unfortunately, this makes places like attics, crawl spaces, and other dark areas of buildings ideal habitat. Many times, brown recluse spiders may be in your house, and you don't even know it due to their secretive nature and hiding in dark places. Recluse spiders hunt at night and do not rely on a web to hunt prey. Instead, they actively hunt their prey which includes insects and other arthropods. Brown recluse spiders bite when they feel threatened or pressed against skin. Many times, bites occur when cleaning closets or garages, putting on clothes, or rolling over one in a bed. After the bite, skin and muscle will begin to breakdown. Diagnosis of a recluse spider bite is difficult because it is painless at first. With symptoms that may not appear for up to 8 hours. Pain is mild to severe and can also itch, swell, and become tender. A blister forms about 24 hours after the bite and a slow healing lesion forms within 1 week. In severe cases surgery may be required to clean the wound.

Female black widow spiders backs are black while male and juveniles have orange, red and white markings on the back. Female black widow spiders are known for their red spots on the underside of their abdomen. Female body length is around half inch, while males are smaller coming in at less than a quarter inch body length. Widow spiders are usually found under protected areas such as wood piles, shrubbery, and inside electric meters. They can also be found indoors if the structure is open to the outdoors. Widow spiders build strong, sticky, irregular webs. They will hang upside down in the web revealing their red spots on the underside of the abdomen. Bites occur when the spider feels threatened or is pressed against skin. Bites typically occur when the spider is accidentally disturbed such as when moving wood piles or cleaning up brush. The bite will affect the nervous system initially causing pinprick sensation that becomes red and swollen. The bite typically turns pale in the center, and it is surrounded by a tender redness. Intense pain can occur within the hour of the bite and may last up to 3 days. Other symptoms include vomiting, leg cramps, tremors, profuse perspiration, loss of muscle tone, and increased blood pressure. The bite can be serious especially for children and individuals with health problems. However, few cases are lethal. Seek immediate medical care for a black widow bite.

This article is not intended to paint spiders in a bad light. They are just doing what nature intended them to do, even the harmful species. 99% of the time they go unnoticed and live among humans causing no harm at all. However, you do need to recognize the danger and be careful when working in dark places or moving firewood where these spiders like to live.



Black widow spider sporting bright red spots on the underside of the abdomen.

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Planting and Caring for Dogwoods, January 20-26

Now is a good time to both care for and plant one of our most beloved native trees. Flowering dogwood is one of the most popular and showy small flowering trees in Eastern North America. It however reaches its western limits in East Texas.

Cornus florida is happiest in acidic, sandy loam soils with good drainage and regular moisture. It prefers high shade or basically the same areas in a landscape that grow azaleas, camellias, gardenias, and hydrangeas well.

Too much water and dogwoods die. Too little water and dogwoods die. Too much clay and dogwoods die. Plant them too deep and dogwoods die. Direct western sun or reflected heat and dogwoods suffer from sun scorch. Too little sun and dogwoods don't bloom. Nick them with a lawn mower or string trimmer and dogwoods get life-threatening borers. Plant a grafted red or a pink one and it's more likely to die than a native white one. They also get anthracnose and powdery mildew.

So, why on earth do we attempt to grow the spoiled brats? Because they are beautiful, graceful, and spectacular, that's why. Plus, the birds love them too. I can't imagine though how many dogwoods have been sacrificed for every nice one we see though. Part of the problem is geography. Because we are on the southwestern edge of their natural distribution, our weather is too hot, too sunny, and too dry during the summertime and too erratic and mild during the wintertime. We also tend to cut down the trees around them exposing them to blistering hot sun that they aren't used to.

Genetics are also a huge problem for us. Unfortunately, the provenance (ancestral genetics) of almost all the dogwoods we purchase at the nursery are from seed collected in the Eastern United States where the plants evolved with milder summers, colder winters, and more regular rainfall. That means the genetics of the plants we are growing don't know anything about Texas and most likely aren't fond of it. Our best choices in order of ease of growing would be volunteer native seedlings, seedlings from a local source, white seedlings from any source, grafted white cultivars, grafted pink cultivars, grafted red cultivars, and lastly grafted variegated cultivars. Certainly, containerized trees are preferred with fall planting best, winter planting second best, spring planting third, and summer planting worst.

Dogwoods must absolutely be planted in well drained sandy loam soils (not clays) and generally need one inch of irrigation about every two weeks during June, July, and August, minus rainfall. They should always be mulched with a thick layer of organic matter (pine straw or coarse organic material), should never be exposed to hot direct sun on their trunks (wrap them like maples when they are young), should never be planted too deep, and should never have their trunks bumped, scraped, or damaged.

If you want to grow your own dogwoods from locally collected seed (from nice native specimens or well-established garden selections) the red-ripe berries need to be macerated (red pulp removed) and cleaned, seed stratified (stored in the refrigerator in moist sand, vermiculite, or perlite) for 3-4 months before planting. Otherwise, plant a nice healthy containerized plant, do not disturb the root ball, and pamper it like a prized princess.



Flowering dogwoods are beautiful in the fall as well as the spring.

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Cryptic Mammals of the Pineywoods, January 27-February 2

The pineywoods of east Texas are a very special place. Not only it is home to a diverse plant community in the Big Thicket found nowhere else in the world, but it is also home to a variety of animals from the charismatic drake wood duck to world record setting alligator gar. While some species can be readily seen like white tail deer, the pineywoods are home to many cryptic species that are rarely seen. Cryptic species have adopted strategies to avoid detection. Some cryptic species are very common but are rarely seen due to their behavior and ability to stay hidden. For today's article we are going to dive deep into the wood of East Texas to better understand several cryptic mammal species that are rarely seen.

Southern short-tailed shrew (*Blarina carolinensis*) is the smallest mammal, averaging 3 and half inches in length, to make the cryptic mammal list. While shrews don't actively avoid staying away from humans, they are rarely seen due to their burrowing nature and utilizing trails under logs and leaves to stay hidden. Shrews are predators and feed mainly on insects. They can be very common in backyards, especially those within wooded areas. Southern short-tailed shrew can be found throughout the eastern wooded areas of Texas.

Long-tailed weasel (*Mustela frenata*) is a species with sporadic records not only through the pineywoods but throughout Texas except for the panhandle. They apparently occupy a variety of habitats including upland woods, forest edges and bottomland hardwoods. They tend to live close to water and sometimes even under human structures without being noticed. Weasels can be active at any time, but they tend to be most active at night making them hard to see. These predators are rarely seen, rarely trapped, and very few scientific records exist in Texas. The species is considered uncommon and is considered wide ranging in the state, but this is more of a guess due to lack of data.

American mink (*Vison vison*) belongs in the weasel family and has a shape of a weasel. They are about the size of a house cat and are semiaquatic mammals. Mink live in dens located near the water edge and are good swimmers and actively catch fish. Mink are mainly nocturnal and live alone. Mink is an economically important wildlife species due to its fur and is a principal fur bearing species in the eastern United States and can be found on fur farms. However, it is not an important fur species in Texas and is ranked 13th in number of individuals harvested amongst fur bearing species like raccoons and otters. Mink can be found in the eastern two thirds of Texas North of a San Antonio to Corpus Christi line. Mink populations appear to be declining in Texas and is considered uncommon.

American Black Bear (*Ursus americanus*) and Mountain Lion (*Puma concolor*) are likely the most talked about cryptic mammals of the pineywoods. Though many sightings are proven to be mistaken identity or unconfirmed there is an uptick of confirmed sightings of both these species. Both of these species populations appear to be recovering across Texas and sightings are becoming more common and populations are being established naturally across their former range. Mountain lions were once common across Texas and after predator control efforts the species was restricted to remote areas of Mountains in west Texas and to a lesser extent the brush country of south Texas. These regions still hold the highest number of mountain lions, however confirmed reports occasionally occur in central Texas and rarely in the Big Thicket. Populations appear to be increasing in central Texas, panhandle, and Gulf Coast areas. Several subspecies of black bear historically occurred in Texas. Until the early 2000s black bear was restricted to remote mountains in three counties in far west Texas. Some scientists even considered the species extinct from Texas. Since that time black bear have migrated north from populations in Mexico to reestablish populations throughout the Trans Pecos region, canyon country north of Del Rio, and now extending into parts of the hill country. This natural recolonization is extremely rare by large carnivores in the current world and may be the best example in modern times. East Texas is home to the Louisiana black bear subspecies which is a smaller subspecies. Black bears have been sighted in 31 counties in East Texas. These individuals are considered young males wandering from established population in southeast Oklahoma and Louisiana. Black bear sightings are increasing across the state from east to west and north to south. While many people are hesitant about the return of black bears they appear to be here to stay and many scientists believe their populations will continue to increase due to the availability of good habitat.

Next time you take a stroll through the pineywoods keep your eyes peeled for these cryptic mammals. You never know you might just be lucky enough to catch a rare sighting!



Long tailed weasel is a widespread species throughout Texas that is rarely seen.

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