



SFA Gardens NEWS

Notes from the Director

By Dr. David Creech

Have you ever noticed how some things in life come full circle? You start somewhere, wander here and there, and then years later you end up back where you started. Well, I can say that is the case with our long love affair with fruit research at SFA Gardens.

I began working with blueberries in 1978 at SFA. It was a brand new crop for Texas. Fresh out of Texas A&M University with a doctoral degree on the wall, I was young, fearless and optimistic. I had studied under Dr. Hollis Bowen and J.B. Storey — the best in the business. I thought I knew a thing or two about fruit. The blueberry arena was wide open and the acidic soils and climate of East Texas seemed perfect. I thought, heck, there's nothing but blue skies ahead. Like everything in horticulture, things got complicated.

The first blueberry fields came into bearing in the 1980s, and a marketing cooperative sprang into action. Realities like freezes, floods, oppressive droughts, heat waves, hordes of pigs or deer, sodium or bicarbonates in irrigation water, and other acts of God taught me that nothing is easy in agriculture. Still, the industry survives to this day. Nacogdoches was named

the blueberry capital of Texas and a June festival was born that continues today. It wasn't long before blueberry plants were a nursery item in the mass markets, as well as small retail outlets.

Blueberries have become part of the backyard garden world in East Texas. In 2015, with 30 years of experience, we came full circle. We brought our blueberry work back on campus. Our blueberry plots are located at the north end of the Pineywoods Native Plant Center, open to the public and every plant is labeled. The collection of more than 70 varieties includes the recommended standards, but also includes exciting, advanced selections from Dr. Steven Stringer's program at the U.S. Department of Agriculture station in Poplarville, Mississippi. To view the extensive collection of varieties, check out my blog at <https://dcreechsite.wordpress.com/2016/09/13/fruit-trials-at-sfa-gardens/>.

During the last year, we created a drip-irrigated vineyard of muscadine

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grapes, *Vitis rotundifolia*. Our goal is to display as wide a collection of varieties as possible. This new planting is located at the north end of the PNPC at Hinds Park. Jimmy Hinds was the first agriculture teacher at SFA and actually farmed with students where this planting now calls home.

Jimmy had a penchant for fruit trees and vines and vegetable gardens, and he is considered the father of modern poultry farming in East Texas. The effort to create the collection led our program to collaborate with SFA alumnus Dr. Justin Scheiner, grape viticulturist at TAMU in College Station. It's that full circle again. Working with Justin, other universities and specialty nurseries, we've reached 54 varieties of muscadine grapes in the collection. Currently in the first year, the plants are cheerful in the bottomland soils of Lanana Creek, and because of space issues, only one plant per variety is planted and every plant is labeled.

OK, it's not over yet. We're into figs! Working with Dr. Allen Owings of Louisiana State University's Hammond Research Station, we have planted a fig orchard at SFA, which includes more than 70 varieties. We use a standard commercial spacing on drip irrigation. Because of space issues, we have one plant per variety.

Finally, kiwifruit came to the SFA Gardens in 2011, and good crops in 2014 and 2015 of the golden kiwi, *Actinidia chinensis*, got everyone excited in our region about the potential. It's a first for Texas. While we have a light crop this year (late frost and rains during pollination kept bee activity low), there's still reason for optimism. We're expanding the project and have begun collaborating with Tim Hartmann, extension specialist at TAMU. Tim and I are on a mission to find the best varieties and learn how to grow them in Texas.

In the land grant or private

university systems in the South, there are few extensive variety evaluation programs for blueberries, muscadines, figs or kiwis in Texas or Louisiana. Figs are part of the work at LSU's Hammond Research Station under the direction of Owings, and we work closely with that program, sharing germplasm, ideas and results. Scheiner is building a collection of muscadine grapes, and we work closely with him. Hartmann has planted the first kiwifruit plantation at College Station in the bottomland of the Brazos River. Still, much more needs to be done.

There's great interest in the farming and gardening community about the

potential of alternative fruits. With the interest in edible landscapes, small market gardens and locally grown produce, there's every reason to deliver answers to enthusiastic homeowner gardeners, as well as farmers looking for alternative crops. With blueberries, muscadine grapes, figs and kiwifruit, our goal is simple: We're here to develop a germplasm repository second to none and to work with colleagues in Texas and Louisiana to find the best strategies for good production. It's all about planning and planting for a better Texas. Until next time, let's keep planting!



Clockwise from top: SFA Gardens Director David Creech began working with blueberries at SFA in 1978. SFA Gardens has blueberry plots located at the north end of the Pineywoods Native Plant Center. Additionally, SFA Gardens is working with Dr. Allen Owings of Louisiana State University's Hammond Research Station and has planted a fig orchard at SFA with more than 70 varieties. In 2011, SFA Gardens introduced kiwifruit and produced good crops in 2014 and 2015 of the golden kiwifruit, *Actinidia chinensis*.

SFA Students Contribute to Educational Program

By Elyce Rodewald

The SFA Gardens educational program reaches thousands of people of all ages in the community. Monthly garden lectures, seminars, plant sales, school-learning excursions, summer camps and the afterschool program create opportunities for visitors to explore and experience the natural world and to expand their horticultural horizons.

SFA student employees play a vital role in the operation of the educational outreach program, and these enthusiastic college students add a fresh dimension to our activities. The students are essential to our success and bring unique strengths, skills and personalities to our educational table. This fall, the Nacogdoches Naturally team is no exception.

Although the students come from varied backgrounds and have different majors, they share a common desire to do work that “makes a difference.” Alex Marquez, Tesla Rickman, Mallory Smith, Alexis Butler, Delisha Livingston and Keaton Brown will serve as role models for our afterschool students and bring their unique backgrounds and interests to our program.

Join me in welcoming our dynamic Nacogdoches Naturally staff members and Boys and Girls Club members to the SFA Gardens!



Tesla Rickman, nutrition major, and **Alexis Butler**, criminal justice student, introduce the Nacogdoches Naturally motto — Be Safe, Be Kind, Be Joyful.



Delisha Livingston, human sciences intern, emphasizes the importance of respect for self, others and nature.



Mallory Smith, biology major, guides students in the care and planting of broccoli and cabbage.



Alex Marquez, political science major, applies kinesthetic learning methods to an active game emphasizing “Leave No Trace” principles.



Keaton Brown, finance student, acquaints students with the Pineywoods Native Plant Center trails through a “Leave What You Find” scavenger hunt.

Groovy Grasses

By Dawn Stover

I've long been a fan of ornamental grasses. For many years, *Miscanthus*, maiden grasses, and *Pennisetum*, fountain grasses, have dominated the landscape. Some natives, like *Muhlenbergia capillaris*, coastal muhly grass, have enjoyed success in our industry, as well. Recently, we've discovered a few selections of our native little bluestem and have become enamored with their color, form and potential in the landscape.

Little bluestem, *Schizachyrium scoparium*, native to nearly every state in the continental United States, is found from prairies to open woods and from limestone glades to the acidic pineywoods soils. It is a clump-forming, warm-season, perennial grass that naturally varies in height and width from 1-to-3 feet in either direction. Leaves range from green to

silvery-blue, often with purple accents and yellow highlights. Plants generally take on a bright, amber hue in the fall. This mid-prairie species is extremely valuable for wildlife for nesting and cover for birds, small mammals and reptiles. As a food source, seeds provide nourishment for a number of small mammals and birds, including game birds, and foliage provides a forage source for bison, deer and elk.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service has selected and improved little bluestem for conservation projects since the 1960s, but horticulture has been a bit slower to pick up this native treasure. We are catching on, and since the introduction of ‘The Blues’ and ‘Prairie Blues’ in the last

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15 to 20 years, a number of superior selections has been introduced. The first patented selection occurred in 2006 with *Schizachyrium scoparium* 'MinnblueA' PP#17310, known in commerce by its trademarked name, Blue Heaven.

Gardeners tend to lean toward selections with blue to silver foliage, which are selections from Western populations, but tend to do pretty well for us in the Southeast. In particular, I have admired the cultivar 'Standing Ovation' throughout the summer. This patented selection from North Creek Nurseries in Landenberg, Pennsylvania, has steely-blue foliage with distinct hints of dusky purple, sea green and a bit of yellow. It colored up early and did not bleach in the summer sun. As fall approaches, the flower spikes are beginning to elongate and give texture with their fluffy florets. I am looking forward to watching the fall color evolve into the vibrant fiery hues noted by North Creek. Surprisingly, with copious rain, rich soil and a time or three when the irrigation ran too long, 'Standing Ovation' is still standing at attention despite my fears that it would lodge with



'Standing Ovation'

the extra TLC. Little bluestem like lean, dry soil and conditions this year were anything but ideal.

There are several compact varieties of little bluestem. I'm not ready to hang my hat on one just yet, but I am seeing potential with 'Little Arrow' and 'Prairie Munchkin' so far. 'Little Arrow' forms a tight, rounded mound with Kelly green foliage and reddish-brown flower spikes. It's the earliest in our collection to flower and set seed.

'Prairie Munchkin' also forms a tight tuft close to the ground, and it has a bit more olive tone to the foliage. In mid-September, the flower spikes are just starting to elongate, so it flowers two weeks later than 'Little Arrow,' and its overall habit is more compact.

I look forward to evaluating more cultivars of our native grasses and incorporating them into the landscape. We'll be adding two new varieties of little bluestem this fall — 'Smoke Signal' and 'Twilight Zone.' We will continue to add new varieties as they become available. I look forward to sharing the outstanding selections with you in the future.

Fruit of the Gods

By Greg Grant

Most Texas gardeners have given up trying to produce edible fruit in their yards. All one has to do is pick up a complicated fruit and nut spray schedule from the local Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service office to put this discouragement in motion. Many of us are not willing or able to spray insecticide and fungicide every seven to 10 days to produce a palatable fruit. Wouldn't it be wonderful if there were a fruit we could grow that required no spraying at all? Well, look no further than the colorful persimmon.

Persimmons are in the genus *Diospyros*, which loosely translates into the "fruit of the gods." They belong to the ebony family, Ebenaceae. There are two persimmons native within our state. The Texas persimmon, *Diospyros texana*, inhabits Central, South and West Texas, and it is noted for its small, black fruit and gray, peeling bark. Though not showy, the dark-colored fruit tastes a bit like a prune and is considered the sweetest fruit on the range by some. Many native Texas animals depend on its produce, including the fox, coyote, raccoon, javelina and turkeys. Though uncommon in trade, it makes a fine, small tree for the hot, alkaline landscapes of North, Central and South Texas.

East Texas is home to the common or Eastern persimmon, *Diospyros virginiana*, which also inhabits the Southeastern two thirds of the U.S. It forms a medium-sized, deciduous tree and sports small orange fruit in the fall along with better-than-average fall color. For thousands of years, the common persimmon was prized for its tasty fruit. Like most persimmons, the fruit is very astringent before fully soft and ripe and will "pucker the mouth" considerably. Captain John Smith, one of the founders of Jamestown, Virginia, was among the first to make note of this. In rural areas, folks



claim the fruits are only truly ripe and sweet after a freeze. Others also say you can predict the weather by cutting open persimmon seeds and finding a knife or a spoon shape inside.

Naturally, early Native Americans in Texas made much use of the common persimmon, especially dried. In fact, the name “persimmon” was derived from a Delaware American Indian word for the artificially dried fruit. In 1539, Hernando de Soto encountered dried persimmons as he explored the South. Alcoholic beverages were made from the sweet fruit, including brandy and beer. Traveling Texas between 1842 and 1844, William Bollaert made note of a beer produced from fermented persimmons and sweet potatoes.

The common persimmon is equally attractive to wildlife, supporting 16 species of birds, including bluebirds, woodpeckers and cedar waxwings, along with deer, foxes, skunks, rabbits, squirrels, raccoons and opossums. My Pappaw and his coon dogs treed many varmints in a persimmon tree.

Though tasty and attractive, the fruit of the common persimmon isn't near as large or ornamental as the Japanese persimmon, *Diospyros kaki*. Like many so-called Japanese plants, the tree is actually a native of China and has been cultivated in Asia for more than a thousand years. A tree full of ripe Japanese persimmons in the fall is a site to behold with many witnesses describing what they think is a tree full of tomatoes or Christmas ornaments.

The Japanese persimmon was brought to Europe in 1796 and then to America in the next century. Most 19th century Texas nurseries offered the “Japan persimmon,” including J.F. Leyendecker’s Pearlfield Nursery in Frelsburg, Texas; Gilbert Onderdonk’s Mission Valley Nurseries near Victoria, Georgia; Shattenberg’s Waldheim Nursery in Boerne, Texas; J.W. Austin’s Pilot Point Nurseries in Pilot Point, Texas; and F.T. Ramsey’s Austin Nursery in Austin.

Japanese persimmons are adapted throughout the state (especially zone 7 and south) and form showy, picturesque, deciduous, small trees. Luckily, most cultivars are self-fertile and will set fruit without cross pollination, although fruit

retention is better with cross pollination. In addition to the show-stopping edible fruit display, the trees also boast showy fall color that ranges from yellow and orange to red. While some harvest the fruit for fresh eating, puddings and breads, others leave the bold ornaments on as long as they last, often well into the winter when the birds eventually devour them. Like the common persimmon, most cultivars must be fully soft and ripe before being sweet and edible. However, there are non-astringent cultivars available that can be eaten when the fruit is firm and crisp, almost apple-like. As long as the fruit is still solid, they make excellent interior accents for floral and natural autumn displays.

Available Japanese persimmon cultivars:

Eureka: Vigorous producer of high-quality fruit that is bright orange and as large around as teacups

Fuyu: Popular medium-sized fruit that is non-astringent, can be eaten before it is soft and generally seedless when grown isolated from other cultivars

Great Wall: A sweet, flattened, orange fruit that is a heavy producer

Hachiya: Dark orange, acorn-sized fruit that is popular for drying

Matsumoto Wasefuyu: Non-astringent fruit, which ripens two weeks before Fuyu

Saijo: An old Japanese cultivar with small elongated, orange fruit, popular for drying

Tam-o-pan: Reddish orange fruit, which is constricted near one end

Tani Nashi: Large, cone-shaped, dark yellow fruit, usually seedless

Mail order source for Japanese persimmons:

Womack Nursery
2551 State Hwy 6
DeLeon, TX 76444
(254) 893-6497
www.womacknursery.com



And Then I Looked Around and They Were Gone . . .

By Dr. David Creech



GREG GRANT

Greg Grant, our longtime plantsman at SFA Gardens, has taken a horticulture extension agent position with the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service in Smith County in Tyler, Texas. We will miss him professionally, and I will miss him personally. Greg goes back to the early days of the Mast Arboretum and has seen this garden grow and prosper. Greg's mark on the garden's psyche will last forever. We were lucky to have him here.

Greg's talents are enormous. He's an award-winning horticulturist, writer, conservationist and seventh-generation Texan from Arcadia, Texas. His roots and mine in Shelby County mean our kinship is set in concrete. Greg is the author of numerous books, including "Greg's Garden — A Pineywoods Perspective on Gardening, Nature, and Family" and "Texas Fruit and Vegetable Gardening." He is the co-author of "Heirloom Gardening in the South, Texas Home Landscaping" and "The Southern Heirloom Garden." Additionally, Greg is finishing "The Rose Rustlers" with Dr. Bill Welch, professor at Texas A&M University in College Station. He also writes the popular "In Greg's Garden" column for Texas Gardener magazine and writes a "Greg's Ramblings" monthly blog at arborgate.com. His articles also have appeared in The San Antonio Express News, The Dallas Morning News, Country Living Gardener, Southern Living and Neil Sperry's Gardens, where he wrote for almost 30 years.

Greg is a graduate of the Benz School of Floral Design, a member of the Garden Writers Association of

America, and a lifetime member of the Native Plant Society of Texas, the Texas Bluebird Society, the Big Thicket Association and the Southern Garden History Society, where he serves on the board of directors.

No one is more eager to learn than Greg Grant. He holds a master's degree in horticulture from Texas A&M University and has taken post-graduate classes from Louisiana State University, North Carolina State University and SFA.

Greg has had a varied career. He was a horticulturist with Mercer Arboretum and San Antonio Botanical Gardens, an instructor at SFA and LSU, a horticulturist with the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, part-time employee at the Antique Rose Emporium, and the director of research and development at Lone Star Growers in San Antonio.

Greg wins the prize for introducing plants that have made a mark in the industry. Just a few of his industry-changing plants include the Blue Princess verbena, dwarf pink Mexican petunia, Gold Star esperanza, Laura Bush and VIP petunias, John Fanick phlox, Stars and Stripes pentas, Pam's Pink honeysuckle, Lecompte and Flora Ann vitex, Henry and Augusta Duelberg sages, Big Momma and Pam Puryear Turk's cap, Peppermint Flare hibiscus, Marie Daly, Nacogdoches (Grandma's Yellow) and Climbing Belinda's Dream roses.

The Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service presented Greg with the Superior Service Award, and the Native Plant Society of Texas presented him the Lynn Lowery Memorial Award for horticultural achievement in the field of native Texas plants. He received the Garden Writers Association Silver Award for his book "Heirloom Gardening in the South."

Greg has traveled extensively to hundreds of botanical gardens throughout the U.S. and Europe and has given thousands of inviting and, of course, very entertaining lectures. His garden, farm and plant introductions have been featured in many magazines and newspapers, including Southern Living, Texas Gardener, Neil Sperry's Gardens, The Dallas Morning News, The Houston Chronicle, The Los Angeles Times, The San Antonio Express News and Woman's Day.

Greg lives in deep East Texas in his grandparent's restored dogtrot farmhouse, where he tends a small cottage garden, his Rebel Eloy Emanis Pine Savanna and Bird Sanctuary, a little flock of hens, and terriers Acer, Lizzie, Mollie and Sonny. Greg, we will miss you.



KERRY LEMON

When Kerry Lemon first approached me about retiring I said, "I forbid it." Well, that didn't work.

Since 2000, Kerry has made a huge impact on our environmental education program. She first graced SFA Gardens as a volunteer, and after a while, she was assigned to short-term contracts, primarily to handle summer camps for kids. She has served as camp director for the SFA Pineywoods Camp since 2002, and during that time, she touched the lives of thousands of children.

In July 2009, Kerry became a part-time assistant educational coordinator for the SFA Gardens environmental education program. This was initially through a grant through the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's Community Outdoor Outreach

Program. Since then, there's been a whirlwind of activities that have connected kids to nature. She served as project director of Nacogdoches Naturally, an outdoor adventure program that includes afterschool, family weekend and summer camp programs. As the coordinator of afterschool programs, Kerry provided kids with a healthy dose of learning science, exploring nature, developing outdoor skills and gardening. Kerry also managed outdoor family day through the Earth Day Celebration, Breakfast on the Farm, Great Backyard Bird Count and an Outdoor Adventures Day. Kerry is part of the reason our program has grown from just impacting

a few kids to more than 15,000 children connecting with the environment and horticulture.

After growing up in Austin, Kerry lived in California for seven years and spent a year studying in Madrid, Spain, before returning to her Southern roots and moving to East Texas in 1988. Kerry's experience as an educator spans over three decades, including work with special needs infants in pre-school and elementary classrooms, training adults with developmental disabilities, teaching English as a second language, providing environmental education to children and adults, and homeschooling her two children. Kerry has been certified to teach a variety

of environmental education curricula, including Project Wild, Project Aquatic Wet, Project Learning Tree, Leopold Project and Keep Texas Beautiful — Waste in Place. She is certified through TPWD in angler education and as an archery instructor through the National Archery in the Schools Program. Additionally, Kerry was trained in Wilderness First Responder through the Wilderness Medicine Institute and is currently certified as a canoe instructor through the American Canoe Association. We wish her well in the next chapter of her life.

Upcoming Events



NOV. 5: CHEERFUL WINTER CONTAINERS

Discover the hows and whys of container gardening with Sharon Smith of Blue Moon Gardens from 9 a.m. to noon in her cheerful winter containers seminar. You can put your knowledge to the test as you create your own special garden to take home. The cost is \$55 for SFA Gardens members and \$65 for non-members.



NOV. 10: THERESA AND LES REEVES LECTURE SERIES

Hear Dr. Yalma Vargas of the University of Guadalajara, Mexico, present "Sugar Maples From USA to Guatemala: Phylogeographic Patterns and Taxonomic Novelities," at 7 p.m. The lecture is free to the public and will be followed by a drawing for plants from SFA Gardens.



DEC. 3: DECK THE HALLS: USING EVERGREENS TO DECORATE FOR THE HOLIDAYS

Join Dawn Stover, research associate at the Mast Arboretum, to learn how to create elegant wreaths and garlands using natural items from the garden and forest from 9 a.m. to noon. The cost is \$25 for SFA Gardens members and \$30 for non-members. Class size is limited. All materials will be provided.



DEC. 8: THERESA AND LES REEVES LECTURE SERIES

Listen as Dr. David Creech, SFA Gardens director, recounts "Garden Adventures in the Past Year," at 7 p.m. The lecture is free to the public and will be followed by a drawing for plants from SFA Gardens.

Events listed above will be held at the Brundrett Conservation Education Building, located at 2900 Raguet St. For reservations, call (936) 468-4129 or email sfagardens@sfasu.edu.



COME GROW
WITH US.

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*“Autumn is a second spring when
every leaf is a flower.”*

– Albert Camus

