



SFA Gardens NEWS

Notes from the Director

By Dr. David Creech

Right off the bat, I feel like using a few choice expletives about the weather. All gardeners are epic complainers about bad weather. Right now, it's the record-breaking high temperature marks we're struggling with. It's miserable. Nacogdoches has seen temperatures up to 104 and 105 F. Add in warm 80 F and warmer nights and long stretches between rains, well, you have plants and people in distress. That said, some places are better off than others. As in life, there's always someone who's in worse shape. I recently complained to Dr. Tim Hartmann, horticulture program specialist at Texas A&M and my fruit research collaborator, about our routine days of stifling heat and lack of rain. He sent me an image of the official Brazos River high temperature mark on July 9 — a sizzling 109 F barn burner. We hit 104 F in Nacogdoches, which Tim thought sounded balmy. He quickly let me know that Nacogdoches received 3.5 inches in early July, while he spent June and July with zero precipitation. He didn't want to hear any more of my whining. I call this weather shaming. However, I do remember as a student worker many years ago at Texas A&M, I dropped a

pipe wrench in a crack in the Brazos River bottom and never saw it again. I guess things could be worse.

When temperatures get much above 100 F, many woodies shut down. Some tell you they're in trouble, while others don't. Oakleaf hydrangea is very drought tolerant once established, but it's famous for using wilt like a flag. It's a "Hey, look at me" response. The rule is that if oakleaf is wilting in the afternoon, no big deal. They do that anyway. However, if it's a heavy wilt early in the morning, they need a drink. Wilt is a useful early warning system. Many ornamentals don't show their cards until after the fact, and the transition between surviving and dying is a fine one — sometimes hard to see with the naked eye.

The Fig Preserve has a new interpretive sign thanks to a donation from Debbie Ireland in memory of her late husband, Mark Ireland. We had a small ceremony on May 21 to dedicate the sign installation at the research plots. This area, located on the east side of the intramural

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A small ceremony was held to dedicate the new interpretive sign in honor of Mark Ireland at the Fig Preserve.

fields, is part of our expanding fruit work at SFA Gardens, and Debbie is helping greatly. With Tim Hartmann's cooperation, we've managed to add an additional 60 fig varieties to those already in place. This makes our collection of roughly 120 figs perhaps the finest in the Gulf South.

On May 12, SFA's Center for Applied Research and Rural Innovation held a showcase of the projects funded. We are one of the funded projects, and we're excited to collaborate with the SFA grounds department to create the Research Platform for Woody Ornamentals at the Science Research Center. CARRI has funded over a dozen interesting projects, and ours will impact the nursery and landscape industry in Texas, diversify and improve SFA's campus landscape, enhance and beautify the Science Research Center, provide valuable information on potential new landscape trees for Texas, and, if our projections are correct, create a fiscally-sustainable operation in the years ahead. Our staff and student assistants have set up the nursery site, and we're almost ready for a planting in early fall 2022.

The annual SFA Gardens succulents and houseplant sale was a surprising success. Does anyone want to buy plants in the dead of summer? Yes. With Jordan and volunteers in fine form, the event was held at the Pineywoods Native Plant Center. We had a cheerful, steady crowd, and the income was enough to start thinking of how we can improve it. Next year we will add all of the wonderful desert lilies that scoff at needing water in our region. They could care less about the heat. If you think about it, we have an unexploited world of *Agave*, *Hesperaloe*, *Yucca*, *Nolina*, *Dasylyrion*, *Dyckia*, *Manfreda* and other so-called desert lilies for those neglected, dry, sunny spots in our garden. This summer has convinced me — it's nice not to have to water something.

A Fruit Field Day at SFA Gardens is set for September 30 and you are invited to join in the fun. Drs. Tim Hartmann, Justin Schiener and I will make brief presentations at the Ina Brundrett Conservation Education Building, located at 2900 Raguet Street, before jumping on the SFA minibus to take in blueberries, muscadines, kiwifruit, figs, feijoas, persimmons and other fruits. Many of these are rarely encountered in gardens of the Gulf South. Registration is \$15, and you can sign up on the SFA gardens website, the SFA Gardens Facebook page or on site the day of the event.

It's no secret that without volunteers this place wouldn't function. While COVID-19 did a number on everyone and everything, we're back and have a growing and cheerful band of volunteers. There's too much to do, no doubt. If you're local and interested in being part of our growing adventure, please contact us at sfagardens@sfasu.edu, and we will get you going. These 128 acres are more than just another pretty face. We have a great core staff that understand the mission and value of what we do. Jordan, Duke, Thomas, Devin, Allan and I are not here just to survive — we're here to thrive. Until next time, let's keep planting. 🐝



Thomas Dimmitt, garden technician, preps the land for SFA's future woody ornamental and tree nursery, funded by a grant from SFA's Center for Applied Research and Rural Innovation.



SFA's Center for Applied Research and Rural Innovation held a showcase of the projects funded on May 12. Thanks to this funding, SFA Gardens will establish a Research Platform for Woody Ornamentals at the Science Research Center.

Texas A&M OVERTON FIELD DAY REVIEW

By Jordan Cunningham

On Thursday, June 30, I attended the Texas A&M AgriLife Research and Extension Center's Horticulture Field Day in Overton. The morning included a self-guided tour of the East Farm Horticulture Trial Area and the Demonstration Garden at the Overton AgriLife Center.

The field day originally began in 1993 as a way to display trials of ornamental plants for horticulture companies and avid home gardeners. The best part about the trials is seeing the presentation of different selections of plants in a true Texas climate. New cultivars are displayed and can easily be compared to selections that growers are more familiar with. SFA Gardens has a large trial garden for many different types of woody plants, but the Overton AgriLife Center specializes in smaller ornamental plants like zinnias, coleus, lantana and vinca. This year they tried over 350 selections.

As each guest entered, we were given two pin flags — pink flags for the ladies and blue flags for the guys. Each guest was encouraged to pick their two favorite plants and mark them with a flag. As the morning went on, the crowd favorites became clear. This year the most admired plant was *Rudbeckia hirta* 'Denver Daisy', with about 20 flags. The Overton staff annually records the most popular plants in their People's Picks List. *Rudbeckia* 'Denver Daisy' will surely be at the top of the 2022 list.

The zinnias are always a huge success. This year the best performer was the *Zinnia Zesty™ Purple*. Even in the humid heat of June, this zesty hit was six inches taller than its neighboring trials. Much time was spent debating the best yellow flower. Was it *Zinnia marylandica* 'Double Zahara Yellow' or *Zinnia Zydeco™ Deep Yellow*?


The Syngenta flower company had several new lantanas on trial including *Lantana Bandolista™ Coconut*, *Lantana Bandolista™ Mango* and a few other beautiful cultivars. They all had great color and were popular with people and pollinators alike. An on-site Syngenta representative said that these selections showed great sterility, meaning that they will not seed out in the garden. I happen to have a *Lantana Bandolista™ Coconut* in my personal garden this year. I love the fresh white blooms, and I am eager to see it grow and test its cold hardiness.

There were so many wonderful things to see this year, but not every trial resulted in success. In fact, there was



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a whole row of very crispy *Argyranthemum*. The marguerite daisy and most of the *Pentas* also were sad looking. However, these outcomes are all part of the trialing process. All of the plants were watered the same and subjected to the same summer heat and direct Texas sun. Seeing these results help growers and gardeners decide what plants they will grow based on the conditions their gardens or customers experience.

Horticulture Field Day at Overton was a great display of the science of horticulture. Anyone can view the trials during the field days. To find the date for the next field day and see the previous People's Picks List, visit the Overton Agrilife website at <https://flowers.tamu.edu/field-day/>. 



The Prototype Garden Gnome – Hermits

By Thomas Dimmitt



Let's talk about hermits — no, not hermit crabs. Although, I imagine those would be fun in a water garden. I'm referring to those pious folks that lived an isolated existence away from civilization. Between the 15th and 18th centuries, instead

of ornamental gnomes in a garden, wealthy European aristocrats hired peasants to portray hermits on their estates and châteaux.

These hermits were given a hermitage in a hut or cave located on the estate, provided food, as well as a stipend. The role of a garden hermit was very serious. They were typically restricted from leaving the estate and had to shun public life, basically living in solitude. The practice was most common in England, but also was observed in France, Ireland and Scotland.

To sell the idea that these were naturally-occurring hermits on the lavishly-landscaped estates and châteaux, hermits had to dress the part. Aristocrats agreed that hired hermits should dress like druids, elite members of ancient Celtic cultures. However, the agreement stopped there as aristocrats couldn't reach a consensus on what exactly a

druid looked like. Therefore, some hermits wore crowns of leaves while others got stuck in a dunce's cap — very similar in appearance to hats worn by garden gnomes! Typically, garden hermits were required to dress in unkempt clothes and were restricted from grooming. Picture a smelly, mute member of ZZ Top with long fingernails frolicking in a garden while dressed in dirty clothes, and you have yourself an 18th century aristocrat's ideal garden hermit.

Garden hermits were expected to entertain guests with their wise and mysterious presence. In certain cases, garden hermits recited poetry or served wine to visitors, while others were forbidden to speak to anyone. As one 1797 advertisement for a garden hermit stated:

“The hermit is never to leave the place, or hold conversation with anyone for seven years during which he is neither to wash himself or cleanse himself in any way whatever, but is to let his hair and nails both on hands and feet, grow as long as nature will permit them” (Gell, 1968).

Due to these harsh guidelines, hermit turnover was a problem for most aristocrats. One hermit who worked for Sir Charles Hamilton in the Plainshill Garden lasted only three weeks. The hermit was supposed to live on the estate for seven years in exchange for 700 pounds — roughly \$77,000 in modern currency. Unfortunately, the hermit's employment was cut short after he was discovered drinking at a local pub.

The garden hermit fad eventually came to an

anticlimactic ending. This was most likely due to the harsh living and working standards. Soon, aristocrats began decorating their abandoned hermitages with items, such as eyeglasses, books and hourglasses, to suggest a hermit lived there. Some estates even installed mannequins in places of their hired hermits. However, as historian Gordan Campbell argues, the hermit may have never left us. “The garden hermit evolved from the antiquarian druid and eventually declined into the garden gnome” (Campbell, 2013). 🐝

Citations: Campbell, G. (2013). *The Hermit in the Garden: From Imperial Rome to Ornamental Gnome*. Oxford University Press.

Gell, William. (1968). *A Tour in the Lakes made in 1797*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne Frank Graham.



An English hermitage illustrated in “Merlin: a poem” (1735) via the British Library

Moody Gardens Research Plots Ready for Phase Two

By Dr. David Creech



We have a blank slate at our 2-acre Moody Gardens evaluation plots. Despite their substantial size, most of the trees and shrubs were moved to locations at Moody Gardens and throughout Galveston Island. A wonderful alee of *Taxodium X ‘T406’* was created at the western parking lot of Moody Gardens.

We are ready for a new tranche of plant materials for the test plots. We look at this project as a revolving door nursery. Basically, we evaluate a wide range of plants, discard the failures and celebrate the winners by giving them a new home. Through the leadership of Priscilla Files, senior arborist with the Galveston Island Tree Conservancy, and the horticulture team at Moody Gardens, we have achieved this goal. In collaboration with Galveston Parks and Recreation, Galveston Independent School District and Moody Gardens, some interesting plants from our test plots were relocated to various parks including West End Dog Recreation Area on 83rd Street. That made serious points with my wife, Janet, who likes dogs more than humans. We recently spent

a great weekend doing the Galveston Historic Homes Tour, and, of course, took a private tour of the new tree plantings.

Environmental science graduate student Rachel Murray successfully defended her master’s degree on July 15. Her research project, “Soil Salinity and Sodicticity of Galveston and Pelican Islands, Texas,” has produced the first geographical information systems salinity heat map of the island. This is a platform we can build on in the years ahead and one that should be useful to land and vegetation managers on the island.

What’s next for the project? We have a new group of ornamental candidates that will be planted this fall. Many are currently at SFA Gardens, and we have others waiting for pickup at several cooperating nurseries and universities in the Gulf South. Before that happens, we will add 60 cubic yards of off-island soil to the plots to fill holes left by the dug trees and rebuild the beds that define the plot. Prior to planting, a thin layer of composted pine bark will be added to the beds as a mulch. The irrigation system will be reworked and the weeds killed down the rows before planting. The plots will be back in the evaluation business in November. Stay tuned. 🐝

Wild About Woodies

By Dr. David Creech

The July Wild About Woodies event is history. Sauntering through the wide range of collections with like-minded horticulturists was inspiring. Our small group moved between the Pineywoods Native Plant Center, Jimmy Hinds Park, the crape myrtle and *Taxodium* collections, as well as all of the woodies in the Mast Arboretum, Ruby Mize and Gayla Mize Gardens. The SFA minibuss kept us on time and everyone together. It was great having former students Dr. Andrew King of King's Nursery and Matt Welch, horticulturist for Madrone Landscaping, give talks and provide insight throughout the tour. Greg Grant, Smith County Extension Agent, and Dr. Allen Owings, senior horticulturalist at Clegg's and Bracy's Nurseries, provided terrific color commentary. Time has been a fine friend to this garden. 🐝



X *Gordlinia grandiflora*

By Dr. David Creech



SFA Gardens has had the Mountain Gordlinia for over a decade and have always found it to be showy and durable. However, we've always placed it in partial shade, as is generally recommended for the Deep South. Mountain Gordlinia is still a rarely-encountered, fast-growing hybrid shrub or small tree. It was developed in 2003 by Ranney and Fantz at North Carolina State University. What makes it unique is that it's a cross between *Franklinia alatamaha* and *Gordonia lasianthus*. Both are natives of the South, with *Franklinia* extinct in the wild and very tricky to grow in our region. It's quite susceptible to a number of root maladies, and most of the straight *Franklinia* we've planted in our gardens died. However, we do have one tree in the Gayla Mize Garden that survived. It's performing well, has flowered for half a decade and even survived the minus 4 F freeze in February 2021. Fall color is late and leans to the orange and red end of the spectrum.

Camellia-like flowers bring a smile to everyone who sees them. They have a pleasing fragrance and the flowering season is from mid-summer into September. The plant shown here is in the trialing garden at the Mast Arboretum, right below the Jim and Beth Kingham's Children's Garden and pavilion on East College Street. What makes this particular specimen unique is that we parked it in a full sun location. To be honest, I suspected it would burn in the location, but it hasn't so far. Of course, August may change that. It's mulched well, drip irrigated and on a well-drained berm. 🐝

Why we Need Outdoor Environmental Centers Like SFA Gardens

By Dr. Alan Sowards

There are many benefits to teaching outdoors. Research provides evidence and insight to many of these benefits, and the following are my top 10.

1. Nature-based education provides an array of positive academic outcomes along with physical, mental and emotional health benefits.

2. Teachers report increased student engagement, critical thinking and social skills.

3. Students who spend more time outside tend to exhibit increased creativity.

4. Research by the Place-based Education Evaluation Collaborative found that place-based education fosters students' connection to their community and boosts student achievement while helping them learn to take care of their environment — starting in their own backyard, school grounds, gardens and nature centers.

5. Getting students outside leads to more active, experiential learning, making education more relevant.

6. Being outside increases students' attention to tasks they're working on. When the students are more interested, they are better able to retain what they learn.

7. Learning outdoors increases student motivation.

8. All students learn by doing. It's not just about teaching outdoors, but about using the outdoors to teach in hands-on, authentic ways.

9. Students immerse all their senses in the outdoors, making a powerful difference in their learning.

10. Being outdoors reduces stress and improves overall well-being.


Richard Louv, author of "Last Child in the Woods," stated, "Nature can be an equalizer for students. Children shine outdoors in a way that they can't in a traditional classroom. It can help teachers reach a wider range of learners."

In my own outdoor research, I pre-and-post tested students on content knowledge gained on several outdoor science activities. This treatment group had a 52% increase in knowledge gained on the science concepts being taught outdoors. My research also showed no significant differences in knowledge gained by gender or ethnicity.

Outdoor education can provide a more equitable learning environment for all students, helping to close the opportunity gap for students who lack access to nature.



Outdoor classrooms can help improve the focus and attention spans of children and provide quieter, safer environments for children with histories of disruptive behavior. The students who might be the most likely to be excluded due to logistical challenges are often the ones who stand to benefit the most from time spent in the outdoors.

We are fortunate that the SFA Gardens provides these great outdoor opportunities that benefit our community. So, get outside and enjoy the beauty that nature has provided and visit the SFA Gardens! 

Plant Profile: Ashy Sunflower, *Helianthus mollis*

Contributed by Dawn Stover,
USDA NRCS East Texas Plant Materials Center

These dog days of summer harken memories of the summer of 1998 during the early days of my tenure at SFA Gardens. We planted 75 Chinese fringe trees on Wilson Drive to commemorate SFA's 75th anniversary. As it turns out, that summer was the second hottest on record. If memory serves, we had more than 100 days that were 100 F or more. Given that there were two of us on staff at the time and summer student labor was next to non-existent, we spent that summer dragging hoses and fixing irrigation. I will never forget dragging water hoses across Wilson Drive to get water from the Agriculture Building to all those trees. That oppressive heat did little for morale.

Here we are again a couple of decades later with no rain and triple-digit temperatures. Our well at the Natural Resources Conservation Service East Texas Plant Materials Center has decided its time here on earth is done, and we are struggling to get water to our newly-planted studies and evaluations. Luckily, our team is creative, quite resourceful, and there are some young people here to drag those pesky hoses.

Brutal summers like these prove plant selection and the concept of right plant, right place is vital to an enduring landscape. Native plants are always a great choice, and when given the right situation, they are almost always carefree contributors in the garden. Just today, as the mercury hits 100 F and the feels-like temperature is a less-than-comfortable 112 F, the ashy sunflower in our ETPMC production fields are just beginning to say hello, and countless pollinators are busy taking advantage of that gift.

Ashy sunflower, *Helianthus mollis*, is a perennial sunflower native to a swath of the Central United States from the Gulf Coast to the Great Lakes, preferring the dry, sandy soils of prairies, grasslands and forest edge. It's an upright grower that spreads through rhizomes and reseeding. The foliage is densely covered with fine hairs giving the leaves and stems a white/grey look. This coloration is where the common name "ashy" is derived. Two-to-three-inch, sunshine yellow flowers occur collectively on stiff stems, opening from the top down. Given the right situation, plants will spread, sometimes aggressively — but that's where




right plant, right place comes in. More on that later.

The flowers are attractive to pollinators — especially native bees — and foliage is host to silvery checkerspot and gorgone checkerspot butterfly larva. The seeds are consumed by upland gamebirds and granivorous songbirds like finches. Yes, you get to learn with me too. Granivorous means feeding almost exclusively on grains — think plant seeds. Cattle will graze on young foliage, as will deer. In my new line of work, attracting deer is actually a bonus rather than a problem. Who would've figured?

The USDA NRCS Plant Materials Program has released a germplasm appropriate from Southeast Texas through Louisiana to Southern Mississippi called Cajun Sunrise. As you can imagine, it's heat and humidity tolerant, and will pass the "Summer of 1998/2022" test. I doubt it would do well in its northernmost range around Lake Michigan, but that's precisely the point of research and development for regional adaptability. Those "Yankee" genetics of the same species wouldn't stand a snowball's chance on a Texas sidewalk in August.

Let's get to right plant, right place. What do you do with this mildly aggressive, perennial sunflower that I've just introduced? Give it room. Ashy sunflower is an excellent component for naturalistic and prairie type plantings. Tuck one here and there throughout native bunchgrasses like little bluestem. Include it in conservation practices for field and forest. Cattle will

graze it, so definitely include it in native grass pastures. Too wild for you? Give it some space in your pollinator garden, or plant it on a dry slope to help with erosion control. Have a sunny corner with poor, sandy soil? Ashy sunflower could be your answer. The flipside to right place is, of course, the wrong place. Given rich soil with ample moisture, plants may become too aggressive, and high fertility or excessive organic matter will cause the tall stems to flop over.

Sunflowers in general are some of the best summer flowers for pollinators. Why not plant one that's drought tolerant, perennial and robust through the summer? The ashy sunflower could be your new favorite flower! 



Upcoming Events

AUG. 11 **Tea Time with Dr. Yan Chen** 

AUG. 13 **Saturday Seminar: Floral Design with Jordan Cunningham**

SEPT. 8 **"Phase II of the Gardens at TAMU: Manifest Destiny in Action!"**
with Dr. Mike Arnold 

SEPT. 30 **Fruit Field Day**

OCT. 1-2 **Fabulous Fall Festival Plant Sale**

OCT. 13 **"Containing Edibles to Maximize Your Garden's Beauty and Yields"**
with Dr. Kathryn Fontenot 

NOV. 10 **"A Path to Successfully Growing Mediterranean Plants in Southeast Texas"** with Dr. Fran de la Mota 

 Indicates the event is part of the Les and Theresa Reeves Lecture Series, which takes place at 7 p.m. the second Thursday of each month in the Brundrett Conservation Education Building.

For more information, call (936) 468-4129, or email sfagardens@sfasu.edu.



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“Gardens are not made by singing ‘Oh, how beautiful,’ and sitting in the shade.”

Rudyard Kipling

