



# High on the Desert Cochise County Master Gardener Newsletter

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The University of Arizona and U.S. Department of Agriculture Cooperating

## In a Desert Garden

### Lagerstroemia – Crape Myrtle

For those lazy gardeners who want a lot of bang for their buck, do I have a plant for you: Crape Myrtle. These plants are easy to grow, somewhat drought tolerant after being established, not fussy about soils, and love heat. They also come in several sizes, from small to tall shrubs, multi- and single-trunked tree and in an array of colors. They also have a long blooming season—all summer, interesting bark, and some have beautiful fall colors.

*L. indica* can be a big shrub or a tree to 25 ft. tall. This plant is native to China and develops an interesting bark and has brilliant red leaves in fall. There are a variety of *lagerstroemia* hybrids with wonderful colored flowers in all shades of pink. Some have Indian Tribe names like Hopi and Comanche. There also is a

### There is a Crape Myrtle for every taste.

variety, *L. faurieri*, that is native to Japan and has white flowers. *L. indica* can have serious mildew problems when planted in too much shade or in cooler climates. The hybrids are more mildew resistant. There is also a whole series of dwarf hybrids that make excellent focal points in a perennial border or a rock garden.

They too come in a variety of lovely colors. Rarer is a variegated variety, Peppermint Lace, a shrub with deep pink flowers and green leaves edged in white. I have never come across it anywhere.

Crape Myrtles bloom on new wood and take well to pruning; which is best done in winter. Cut off seed pods and thin out twiggy growth to give it a nice compact shape. Plants do best with deep infrequent watering. There is a Crape Myrtle for every taste.

Angel Rutherford, Master Gardener

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## February Reminders

- ◆ Winter prune
- ◆ Prune roses
- ◆ Cold-moist stratify seeds
- ◆ Plant bare-root trees
- ◆ Prepare spring planting beds
- ◆ Clean and repair drip irrigation systems
- ◆ Finalize spring garden plans
- ◆ Keep watering

## Cuttings 'N' Clippings

✱ The next CCMGA meeting is 5:00 p.m. Thursday, February 3, 2005 at the University of Arizona South campus, Room 505. **NOTE: This a room change.** The speaker will be Glenn Minuth on *How Plants Adapt to Desert Environments*.

✱ The next *Water Wise* Workshop will be held from 9:00 to 10:30 a.m. at the Arizona Folklore Preserve (AFP) Ramsey Canyon Rd (3.5 miles from Hwy 92 turn-off) on February 5. The title of the workshop is *Water Wise Fruit and Vegetable Gardening* with presenter Water Wise educator Laurie Fernandez. For more information contact Cado Daily at the Cooperative Extension, Ext. 2139.

*Robert E. Call*

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Extension Agent, Horticulture

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Editor

## High on the Desert

There's still time to register for the 12<sup>th</sup> annual  
High Desert Gardening & Landscaping Conference

**March 4 & 5, 2005**  
at Buena High School in Sierra Vista.

If you use the registration form in this newsletter  
the late fee will be waived!

For more information call the Cooperative Extension  
(520) 458-8278, Ext. 2141.

We hope to see YOU there!



## Water Wise

**Save Water, Save \$\$**

The following are available free of charge through the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension:

- ◆ *Water Wise* bulletins containing practical, low-cost tips for reducing water use and conserving natural resources.
- ◆ *Water Wise* audit and guide to resource conservation, a systematic check-list with cost saving alternatives for reducing water use around your home or business and conserving your property's natural resources.
- ◆ *Water Wise* consultation for new and current property owners, home builders, and developers. Learn how to incorporate water saving features into home construc-

tion or remodeling, landscaping, and storm water management.

Call 458-8278, Ext. 2139 with your questions or to make an appointment. You can also check out the *Water Wise* web site at <http://ag.arizona.edu/cochise/waterwise/events.htm> You'll find the list of workshops for 2005 which are open to the public and in most cases free.



## The Virtual Gardener—Breaking the Code

I don't know about you, but when I go to the store to buy some fruits or vegetables, I am always impressed when the checkout clerk types in a number code and the name of the item I'm buying appears on the register screen. It isn't remarkable that a computer can translate a number into a product name, but it is remarkable to me that the clerks can remember so many different codes for so many different items. A medium sized red delicious apple is not an apple any more—it's a 4015. And a medium bunch of celery is a 4583. And a large green zucchini is a 3142. And on and on.

The number that identifies an item of produce is called a Price Look-Up (PLU) code and is similar in concept to the Universal Product Code (UPC) we find on almost everything else we buy. In the case of the UPC, the clerk doesn't have to remember any numbers because they are embedded in a bar code that can be scanned. UPCs are used on things we buy by the unit (including some pre-packaged produce items) and PLU codes are used for produce that is sold by the pound.

When the clerk enters a PLU code and a weight into her terminal, a computer somewhere in the store looks up the price, multiplies it by the weight, and displays the name and extended cost of the item.

If that were all there was to the story, I wouldn't be writing this article, but I think gardeners might be interested in something



you can find out from reading the codes. They tell you something about the origin of the fruits and vegetables you are buying.

Most PLU codes are four digits long and usually begin with a "3" or a "4". This means that there is nothing special about the produce. It originated from plants that have been grown under standard agricultural conditions--sprayed with insecticides and chemically fertilized. This is the opposite of "organically" grown. (I could say they were "inorganically" grown but somehow that seems like an oxymoron.)

PLU codes that are five digits long and begin with "9" indicate that the produce has been organically grown. No insecticides or chemical fertilizers were used in their production. Because these items are considered

superior by some (and cost more), you will usually also find another sticker on the item that says it was organically grown.

The last category of PLU codes is also five digits long but begins with "8" instead of "9." This tells you that the produce has been genetically modified. If you are among those who freak out at the thought of eating something Mother Nature never intended, these are the products to avoid. Of course you need to understand that it is almost impossible to avoid eating genetically modified food these days, since there is no requirement to specially label processed foods that are made from genetically modified ingredients.

If you'd like to find out more about Price Look-Up codes, check out one of the following Web sites:

<http://www.grist.org/advice/ask/2004/10/11/umbra-plu/>

<http://www.plucodes.com/plucodesfaq.asp>

Until next time—Happy Surfing.

Gary A. Gruenhagen, Master Gardener  
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### Water Facts

- ◆ Groundwater can take a human lifetime just to traverse a mile.
- ◆ Groundwater accounts for 50% of our drinking water, 40% of irrigation water, 80% of all rural water use (household and livestock) and 25% of self-supplied industrial water use.

-Eco Water



# Fruit Tree Pruning Demo

Free!

**Saturday, February 12, 2005**

**10:30 a.m. – 12:00 Noon**

**1621 N. San Juan Capistrano, Sierra Vista**

From the intersection of Hwy 90 Bypass and Coronado, turn North into Rancho Carmelos Estates. Take the 1st Left onto San Juan Capistrano—it is the third house on the right.

**Demonstration given by**

**Robert E. Call**

**Extension Agent, Horticulture  
U of A Cooperative Extension**

## Everyone welcome!

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## Go For the Gold: Rain

Who says nothing in life is free? Rain is, and it's yours for the collecting. Ok, someone has to be the smart aleck who says "What rain?" Granted we are in a 20 year drought, but sure as the clouds are building, we will have rain. You may even at some point during periodic deluges question the drought, but whenever it comes rain is precious and free.

Why not catch it? Harvesting rainwater is as easy as putting a container under the roof. But be forewarned—catching rainwater is addictive. You will find that your small container fills up very quickly. Consider that 1,000 square feet of roof yields 600 gallons in a 1" rain. Now that you are hooked, you'll want more containers or upgrade to bigger ones. Active collection involves holding the water in some kind of container. Containers can range from plastic garbage cans to 55 gallon drums, from metal culverts standing on end to thousands of gallons polyethylene or metal tanks. You may be wondering about mosquito control if you hold water in a container. That is easily done by using a special variety of Bt bacteria. Sold as "Mosquito Dunks," these small disks can be found in many local stores. The bacteria is not harmful to

animals or plants, so the rainwater can be used for birdbaths, pets, and landscape watering.

Passive rainwater harvesting often does not require any investment of money, just labor. This is the technique of slowing water down as it flows across a piece of property. Often flooding problems can be turned into rainwater harvesting opportunities. If you neighbor has plastic under his rocks and the water that normally would have soaked into his landscape ends up in your yard, be thankful. You can use the extra water by directing it to that shade tree you planted. As an extra bonus, you have saved on your water bill while his increases. Swales and berms, "bunyips" and "rock enchiladas" are highly technical terms describing techniques and tools used in passive rainwater harvesting. In short, they are dips and bumps that contour the land to direct and hold water, a simple water level used to determine contour lines, and a bunch of rocks wrapped up in wire mesh, respectively.

Active or passive, rainwater harvesting practices are easy and very rewarding. The clouds do not charge a delivery fee, you don't have to pay for filtering out the minerals, and you don't have to pay for the water. You just need to harvest it.

*Cado Daily  
Water Wise Educator*

## The Agent's Observations

**Q**

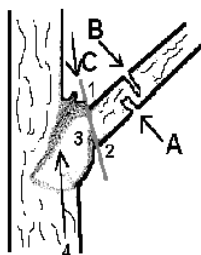
There are some old fruit trees on our property. They are very thick with limb growth. When and how much should these tree be pruned?

**A**

Fruit trees should be pruned now during the dormant season. When renovating old, over-grown trees remove only 30-35% of the total branch diameter of those that are to be cut. For example: Measure the diameter of each branch on the tree. The tree has a total limb diameter of 52". It is determined that five branches that need to be pruned off, remove only 30-35% of those limbs each year. Let's say there are two branches that were three inches, one that was four inches, one that was five inches and the last branch was six inches in diameter. Adding these together totals twenty-one inches of total diameter to be removed. Spray paint all the target limbs. Remove only one third or seven inches of the total diameter per year. So, prune off one three inch and one four inch branch this year. Next year remove the six inch branch. The third year remove the remaining three and five inch branches. There will be a water sprout growth from the areas where the limbs were removed. These can be pruned off at anytime during the year, as well as root suckers. Some arborists will recommend pruning off one-third of the total limb diameter of a tree, or in this example 17" per year of the total 52" of limb diameter.

That is quite severe and may cause problems in the future with the balance of vegetative versus fruit growth. In the desert, sunburn of plant tissue and fruit will also occur. The one-third limb diameter rule per year also works well with ornamental trees.

When making the cuts on larger branches use the three-step method. Undercut the limb a little first about one foot from the branch collar. This will avoid tearing the bark down the trees as the branch is cut. After the undercut saw from above and met the undercut. Then make a clean cut close to the branch collar to remove the remaining one foot of the limb. Cut away from the branch collar because the wound will heal quicker. **Do not use pruning paint or dressing.**



A- Undercut; B- Second Cut; C- Final Cut (from arrow down following the line)

**Q**

Last year during late winter some unusual white balls appeared on the lawn and in some nearby native soil.

This is a new home and these balls seem to be growing in a square area. They looked like some

kind of mushroom. Why do they appear and what can be done about them?

**A**

Yes, these growths are a type of mushroom or fungi called "puffballs." Puffballs are generally spherical or pear-shaped and may lack a stalk like other mushrooms. They are classified in three genera of fungi: *Calvatia*, *Calbovista*, and *Lycoperdon*. These are actually the fruiting structures or bodies of a particular fungi that is growing in the soil. These fruiting bodies are formed to produce spores. Spores are the reproductive stage of a fungus and are analogous to the seeds of flowering plants. Usually the spores are black in color. Other fungi produce "spore mats" that look like pancake batter poured on the ground. Young puffballs are uniformly white with a firm inside and a thin, fragile outer skin. There are many kinds of puffballs, ranging in size from less than an inch to more than a foot and weighing several pounds. They can appear on top of the soil like a ball or burst through the soil surface from underground. Most puffballs become noticeable in the early spring, normally in shady areas when temperatures are still cool. As a puffball matures, all or a large portion of the white interior becomes yellow. Eventually it will

darken into a dry, powdery, dark green, purple or brown spore mass. Puffballs, when mature, will be filled with spores. The thin outer skin may remain intact except for a hole in the top, or it may break away in large, irregular pieces. The spores will “puff” out, being carried on air currents, germinating when growing conditions are adequate.

When puffballs appear on a lawn, they are considered a nuisance and do not cause serious problems. Since mushroom and puffball fungi grow on decaying organic matter, they are most likely to form on tree stumps, tree roots or other spots in the lawn with high organic debris.

Mushroom problems can be prevented on new home sites by removing all discarded construction lumber from the site before sodding or seeding. The square area is probably a piece of ply-



wood or lumber that was buried during construction. Mushrooms will eventually disappear after the organic food base is exhausted. This may take up to 10 years or more for a large stump, root, or piece of lumber. When and where a mushroom or puffball will form is related both to its food source and the environmental conditions.

Slime molds will appear after spring or summer rains. These organisms may appear on lawns or shrub areas that are mulched. They may appear like vomit. Others may be gelatinous with yellow “veins.” Still others may look like used black motor oil.

They do not look like mushrooms at all. They are basically harmless and can be destroyed with a forceful stream of water or a rake. They feed off of decaying wood left in the soil after soil preparation for a lawn or decaying wood mulch in shrub and flowerbeds. When the growing medium they are feeding on dries up they disappear.

If there are concerns about mushrooms being poisonous to children and/or pets, dispose of them. This can be done by mowing or breaking them off as soon as they appear. **Do not eat mushrooms unless you are absolutely sure they are edible. Many are poisonous and can cause severe sickness and even death!**

*Robert E. Call*  
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