High on the Desert Cochise County Master Gardener Newsletter

Vol. 22, No. 11 November 2011

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

The Virtual Gardener—Buffalograss (*Bouteloua dactyloides*)

In this issue, our Extension Educator/Agent, Rob Call, writes about Buffelgrass (*Pennisetum ciliare*), which because of the similarity of names is sometimes confused with Buffalograss (see Page 5). The difference between these two grasses is like the difference between night and day, however. As Rob explains, Buffelgrass is an invasive species to be eradicated at all costs, while Buffalograss is a native grass much prized as a drought-resistant turfgrass.

Buffalograss is so-called because it was the principal food for the huge herds of bison ("buffalo") that once roamed the Great Plains. It is also famous in American history as the source of the sod that was used by pioneers in the Mid-West to build their sod grass homes. Today it is the only native grass widely used for turfgrass.

According to Wikipedia, Buffalograss is a warm-season perennial prairie shortgrass native to the southern Great Plains. It is dioecious, meaning that there are both male and female plants. The fine-textured leaves usually only grow to from 2 to 5 inches in height but if left unmowed the male plants will produce 4 to 8 inch-tall flower stalks bearing flag-like panicles. Female plants produce burr-like seed clusters that grow near the base of the plant. The grass forms a dense root system and spreads by stolons (runners).

Buffalograss lawns can be established from seed or from sod. A University of Missouri Cooperative Extension webpage lists seven different commercially available seed cultivars and eight different sod/plug cultivars. Many of these will produce lawns of female-only plants, which do not have the tall flower stalks

Since Buffalograss is a warm-season grass, it must be planted in the spring after the soil has warmed to 70-80 degrees F. The University of Texas at Austin recommends buying only double-treated seeds that have been processed to enhance

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Inside this issue:

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germination. While untreated seed may have germination rates of only 10 percent, the germination rate of treated seed is usually above 70 percent. Two to four pounds of seed per 1,000 square feet of area is the minimum amount of seed recommended. More is even better.

The techniques for planting seed are basically the same as for other types of grasses. Clear the area of weeds, till to a depth of a couple of inches, roll lightly to firm the soil, and cover the grass seed with a half-inch of soil or compost. Keep the soil moist until the seed has sprouted. The grass should begin producing runners in about four weeks.

Buffalograss

A Buffalograss lawn can be installed with sod late into the fall, but the cost will be considerably more than planting a lawn from seed. Immediately after laying the sod it should be rolled with a heavy roller to ensure good contact between the roots and the soil. Water thoroughly once or twice a day for a week or two and then cut the water to every other day for the next couple of weeks. In three to four weeks the watering can be cut back to a level required to maintain the color of the lawn—about 1 to 1.5 inches of water per week. If left unwatered, the lawn will go dormant but survive. The lawn should be mowed at least once per year (or more often to maintain a groomed appearance) and never shorter than 3 inches.

According to the University of Missouri Cooperative Extension, Buffalograss has only a moderate requirement for nitrogen and should not be over-fertilized. Treatment with a slow-release 3-1-2 or 4-1-2 fertilizer applied at a rate of 1 pound per 1,000 square feet twice a year in early and late summer is recommended.

Until next time, happy surfing!

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Robert E. Call

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Area Horticulture Educator/Agent

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Editor

November Reminders

- This is a good time to install a drip system
- Replace summer mulch with fresh mulch
- Start a winter herb garden
- Protect plants from frost

Cuttings 'N' Clippings

❄ The next CCMGA meeting is 5:00 p.m. in the Public Meeting room of UAS, **Thursday, November 3.** The speaker will be Dr. Randall Norton. He will discuss how transgenic crops have changed agriculture and horticulture. You can find more information about Dr. Norton until November 3 at: **ag.arizona.edu/cochise/mg/events**

❄ **On Saturday, November 5** from 9:00—11:30 a.m. at the UAS Public Meeting Room the FREE Water Wise workshop will be *Septic Care*. Proper care for a septic system will help prolong the life of the system—and protect well water quality. The presenter will be Dr. Kitt Farrell-Poe, UA Water Quality Specialist. For information call Joyce at 458-8278, Ext. 2141 or email **jwilliam@ag.arizona.edu**

❄ Master Gardeners Karen Silva and Joyce Alexander are distributing copies of the following books purchased by Cochise County Master Gardeners Association to eight Cochise County High School libraries: *Sunset Western Garden Book*, *Cool Plants for Hot Gardens*, *AHS Southwest Smart Garden Regional Guide*, *50 Common Insects of the Southwest*, and *The Ultimate Book of Cacti and Succulents.*

The Great Tomato Report—Varieties For the High Desert

Let me start by saying that the above title is a wee bit (or more) of an exaggeration as my tomato garden, 43 plants strong to begin with, didn't fair so well this year. As things stand now, I've only got about six plants still yielding—ouch! Making matters worse, I must admit that I'm not even sure why I lost so many plants—I'll blame it on our lousy monsoon! Nonetheless, I did have some good results. Because my troubles may well have been my own fault, I'll refrain from making negative comments about varieties that didn't do well, except to say that, once again, 'Brandywine' didn't deliver. I'll also not comment much about taste as I found that people's opinions regarding likes and dislikes of specific varieties varied wildly, and hey, they're all better than supermarket tomatoes!

One of my favorite varieties is a large cherry tomato called 'Tommy Toe'. It's been a reliable, heavy producer for me for three years. 'Tommy Toes' can be almost ping pong ball size, perfect for salads or kabobs. Another cherry type that I really like is 'Black Cherry', which I grew for the first time this year. Also nice is 'Sun Gold', a small orange cherry variety, which did well last year but not this year. As always, 'Yellow Pear' (cherry type) yielded gobs of little fruits. Many folks find them weak on 'mater taste, but they're still darn nifty in a salad.

As far as "regular" tomatoes, a new variety for me this year was 'Money Maker', which gave oodles of smallish, ('Early Girl'-size) red, perfectly round tomatoes that did very little cracking or splitting. 'Money Maker', still producing for me, was a pleasant surprise, and it's a variety I'll plant next year for

sure. Another new variety for me was 'Stump of the World'—a great name, eh! 'Stump' is still producing well, giving nice-sized (up to a pound or so), red, flattish globes that don't tend to crack. It'll be in my garden next year. Two varieties I'd grown in previous years, 'Giant Belgium' and 'Gold Medal', both ended up giving me nice yields, although somewhat belatedly. Both tend to crack heavily, but both yield gorgeous, large "BLT-type" slicing tomatoes, almost two pounds in some cases. They are both keepers, cracks and all. Yet another keeper is 'Japanese Black Trifele', which produces pear shaped, purplish brown tomatoes. In 2009, my JBTs cracked heavily, but this year they didn't crack much at all.

'Abe Lincoln' produced small, red tomatoes similar to 'Money Maker', but didn't yield as well. 'Kellogg's Breakfast Tomato'—another great name, eh?--produced fairly well, yielding medium sized orange globes that tended to crack a lot. Both are decent varieties, but they weren't special enough to be certainties in next year's garden. A nifty variety recommended by a friend and fellow Master Gardener is 'Purple Calabash'. My single plant yielded a great many small, heavily fluted, flattened, distorted (so ugly they're cute), purplish tomatoes with green shoulders. Some say the skin is tough, but I thought it was a really nice, "different" tomato. It didn't exhibit cracking and I'll definitely grow it again.

I planted three varieties of paste tomatoes, but only one survived—'Opalka'. 'Opalka' is huge for a paste tomato, some weighing over half a pound and measuring five to six inches long and two or more inches in diameter. In my opinion, this one is great and it will be in my garden from now on.

Varieties that fizzled were 'Mortgage Lifter', 'Aker's West Virginia', 'Solar Fire', 'Amish Paste', 'Speckled Roman', 'Virginia Sweet' (did OK early, but died), 'Henderson's Pink Ponderosa', 'Big Rainbow', 'Cherokee Purple', and 'Pink Girl'. I'll try most of them again next year. I also planted 'Celebrity' and 'Early Girl', neither of which did well this year, although each has done nicely in previous years.

Several people I've spoken with recommended a hybrid variety called 'Goliath', while a CCMG Newsletter reader recommended the varieties 'Phoenix' and 'Merced' ('Merced' in particular, he says it's a big BLT-type). A Farmers Market vendor tells me she's had great luck with 'Sun Sugar', a small orange cherry hybrid similar to 'Sun Gold'.

So, there you have it, the "sorta great" tomato report. I hope my experiences are of some help to you next year. If you have additional recommendations or comments, feel free to e-mail me; my address is below.

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In a Desert Garden

Bird's bill dayflower – *Commelina dianthifolia* Western spiderwort

Since I have lived in Sierra Vista, I have been adding new varieties of plants to my desert garden, not always by choice. Many plants arrived on their own by seeds brought in by the wind or the birds. I have long learned not to pull seedlings in hope a new arrival has come. If I cannot identify the plant, I let it grow and when I know for sure it is unwanted, I pull it. Over the years a variety of plants have been added this way to my collection, and of course, plants grown like this from seed are much more hardy and adapted to our climate. They are most welcomed as they can take care of themselves and most times can exist without additional watering. This year was no different.

On a walk around my little garden last spring, I came upon a tiny little plant growing out of the rocks next to the filter of my pond. I checked on it from time to time, and then early one morning in summer, I saw this little flower with the most intense blue petals—three of them. I immediately recognized the plant—it was a dayflower. On my many hikes in Ramsey Canyon I saw many of these darling blue flowers. There was also a stand of them at the wash at the end of my street. I haven't seen any there for at least ten years. So, I wonder where the little guy in my yard came from. It will always be a mystery. Maybe a bird brought the seed in from the mountains. After the Monument Fire, I noticed that I had a lot more birds in my yard—different species than normally come to my feeders.

The Bird's bill dayflower is a plant of the oak/pinyon and pine/juniper woodlands. The plant has narrow intense green, grass-like leaves. The flowers are one-inch wide, bright blue, and formed from 3 triangle petals. They open early in the morning and wither by noon. Flowering occurs from July to September.

Angel Rutherford, Master Gardener

Bird's bill dayflower

Did You Know . . .

. . . Master Gardeners Angel Rutherford and Bill Schulze write monthly columns for the *Sierra Vista Herald*. Past articles of Schulze's can be found on the Master Gardener Web Site at: **ag.arizona.edu/cochise/mg/desertgardening**

High on the Desert

The **19th High Desert Gardening & Landscaping Conference** is in the planning stages and will be held **February 16 & 17, 2012** at the Windemere Hotel & Conference Center in Sierra Vista. Watch for more information on the Web Site and in this newsletter. Registration forms will be available after the first of the year.

. . . When the University of Arizona opened its doors in 1891 there were only two colleges—Agriculture and Mines, six faculty, and 32 students.

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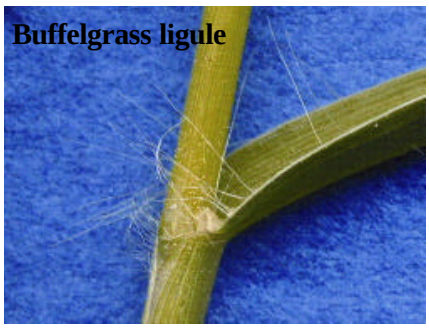
The Agent's Observations

Q I think we have buffelgrass growing in our wash. I know that it is a fire hazard and a problem in the Sonoran Desert. This clumping grass is 3 to 4 feet tall and has a bottle brush looking flower. I would like to get rid of it so it does not spread. What can be done to stop this non-native grass?


Buffelgrass

A Buffelgrass (*Pennisetum ciliare*) is a fire hazard and a rapidly spreading grass. Fortunately it does not survive the colder winters in the Chihuahua Desert of Southeastern Arizona. The grass that is growing in your wash is most likely alkali sacaton grass (*Sporobolus airoides*) or big/giant sacaton grass (*Sporobolus wrightii*). It is native to Southern Arizona and grows in areas where there is adequate moisture like meadows or washes. Alkali sacaton is 1 to 3 ½ feet tall with long, narrow, rolled, dropping leaves. Big/giant sacaton is normally 3 to 6 feet tall with long, wide flat, erect leaves. Flowers are 6 to 18 inches long, having wide-spreading branches and spikelets. They flower from May to October and the ripe seeds are black. Seeds are found along the spikelets. In contrast buffelgrass seeds develop on the end of a stalk, which has a slightly fuzzy appearance that looks like a bottlebrush. The central stem that contains the seeds is extremely rough and hairy, as are the leaves, if you run your fingers from the bottom to the top. Where the leaf blade diverges from the stem, call the ligule, it is hairy when pulled slightly away from the stem. Let the sacaton grass grow naturally and enjoy it.


Big or giant sacaton grass


Buffelgrass ligule

Sources: *Grasses of Southeastern Arizona*. Coronado RC & D Area, Inc. Page 34.
http://www.buffelgrass.org/content/identification
http://www.aznps.com/invasives/BuffelGrass/PENCIL.ID.Removal.pdf

Q When are pecan nuts ready to harvest? How should they be stored?

A If the pecans are harvested and eaten too early, they can cause stomach upset, much the same way as eating green fruit. Maturity of a pecan nut is indicated when the husks lose their bright green color, turn brown and begin to split open at the sutures. Usually this will occur during the later part of October and into November. Frost will speed up this process. If killing frosts occur late in the fall, harvest will be delayed. Typically pecan harvest starts around Thanksgiving. As soon as the husks are open, the nuts can be knocked from limbs or a mechanical harvester can be hired to shake the nuts from the tree. Some people leave the nuts on the tree to fall naturally. Nuts that do not fall usually do not have nut meats inside the shell and are known as "stick tights," because the husks do not open and sepa-

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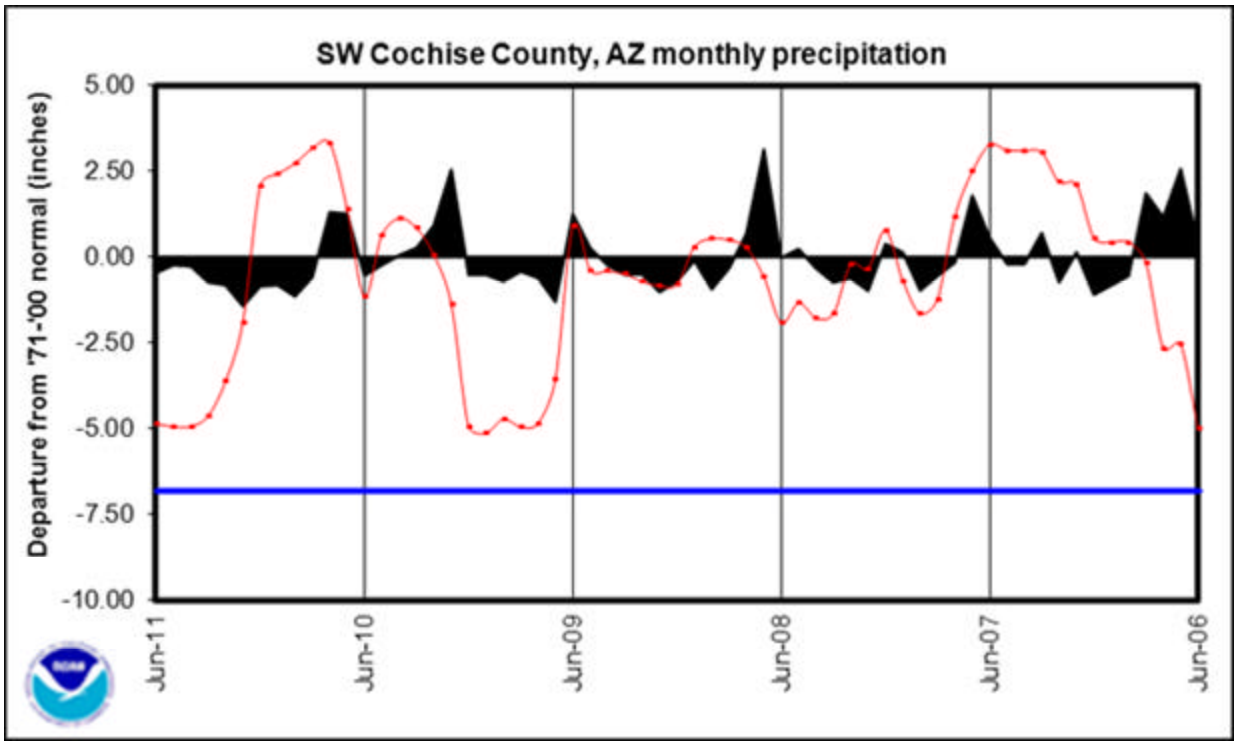

What do the above graphics show? The area shaded **BLACK** shows monthly precipitation departure from (1971-2000) normals. The **RED** line depicts 12-month total precipitation departure from normal with **SURPLUSES** above the zero line and DEFICITS below the zero line. The **BLUE** line shows what is the 60% departure of the yearly normal**. Note: x-axis time scale is reversed -- most recent is at left**. To see more drought information, click on the chart to go to the Tucson Weather Service website

(Continued from page 5)

rate from the nuts. This occurs because of improper pollination during the spring. Pecans are wind pollinated. A leaf blower can be very useful in removing fallen leaves from on top of the nuts on the ground. Homeowners who have several large trees have a big job that can be hard on the back when stooping to pick up the pecans. There are simple nut gathering devices that assist getting the nuts off of the ground without bending over. Do an internet search for "nut gathering tool." After the nuts are gathered, usually they are placed in a garage or storage shed and used through the year. Nuts will not keep well under these conditions. As weather gets hotter the pecan meats will become rancid because of their high oil content, and will not taste good. Also, the husk must be removed if it is still on the nut. Using rubber gloves will decrease finger staining. Of course, the shell must be cracked and removed to eat the nut meat. An excellent way to store the pecans and keep them fresh is to place the shelled nuts in containers or plastic bags and put them in a freezer. The nut meats will keep up to a year. Color is maintained and the flavor is almost as good as freshly harvested pecans. Whole unshelled pecans can also be frozen, but they take up much more freezer space. It is wise to store purchased pecans in the freezer as well to maintain their quality.


nut gathering tool

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