**Weekly Express-News Article**

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**Cutting Back and New Plantings**

Earlier this month we had a hard freeze. It was deep and long enough to kill tomatoes, peppers, vinca, lantanas, Poinciana, and other cold sensitive plants.

The foliage of the herbaceous plants (tomatoes, vinca, and peppers) can be deposited in the compost pile. You have a choice to make on the lantanas, duranta, and other plants that had their foliage killed but have studier stems. They can be trimmed down to the soil surface now, or allowed to stand for a few more months. The stems and freeze killed leaves are valuable cover for wintering birds.

Leave the killed stems in place until February and birds like American sparrows, towhees, Inca doves, wrens, warblers, goldfinches, and others will use them for shelter and feeding areas.

If you are in the planting mood there are a few options that you can consider that contribute to the landscape with neutral or positive impact to the water and resource balance sheet.

Have you every grown bluebonnets as a transplant? Area nurseries have bluebonnet transplants available. Plant them in the garden or in a vacant field to serve as a seed source for future generations of bluebonnets.

In the garden plant them with 18 inches between each plant. Bluebonnets are sensitive to overwatering. The best strategy is to water them at planting and then let them be once they are established. If caterpillars show up spray the bluebonnets with a Bt product. The top will not do much growing in January or February but the roots will be spreading out. In March the top will take advantage of that root system and grow up and out to form an 18 inch tall and 18 inch wide plant. In late March the blooms will appear.

Expect the blooms to last one month. For the seeds to be viable the bluebonnets flower must fade and seed pods will form. The seed pods must fill out and then brown. Store the seeds until next October or let them lie where they fall.

If you want to spread the seeds, the plants with mature pods can be pulled and distributed around the planting area.

One of the best ways to collect and store the seeds is to pull the whole plant when the pods are full size and begin to brown. Put the plants “roots up” in a large paper sack. Place the sacks in a warm dry location and let the seed pods open in the sack.

Spread the seeds in October over a sunny planting site where there is limited plant cover. Bluebonnets thrive in soils where there is no competition to shade the seedlings or organic material to prevent seed-to-soil contact. Poor soil with occasional rocks protruding is often ideal.

A new shade tree in your landscape will need more water to become established than bluebonnets but as the years progress the dividends provided by a well adapted, well placed shade tree pays for itself many times over. A shaded lawn uses significantly less water than grass in full sun and a house shaded by trees uses less power for air conditioning.

Select a well adapted long lived tree. Among my favorites are Texas red oak, Mexican white oak, cedar elm, Montezuma cypress, bur oak, chinkapin oak, Mexican sycamore, lacey oak, live oak, and Chinese pistache.

Place the tree on the south or west side of the building you want to shade. Large shade trees planted in the lawn need to be at least 30 feet apart. Fifty feet apart is even better.

Do not plant your new tree under utility wires or too close to the house. The 30 feet rule works well there as well.

Buy a tree of a size that matches your ability to dig its hole and move it to the hole. A 1.5 inch diameter tree is easy to move to its new site and will adjust to its new home and grow faster than a newly planted large tree.

Dig the hole just as deep as the root ball and 2 or 3 times as wide. Fill in the hole with native soil. The addition of potting soil or other additives generally do not speedup establishment or growth. The tree must eventually put roots in the native soil. If you select a well adapted tree species, it is perfectly capable of doing so.

Soak the hole and root ball at planting. The water is essential for a fast start and helps eliminate any air pockets. Fertilizer can be added next spring at the rate of a cup per inch of diameter.

Cover the root ball with 4 inches of mulch and re-water every time the soil dries under the mulch. It will probably be every 2 weeks this winter and once per week next summer.

If you plant a shade tree there is a good possibility you can receive a $50 rebate from CPS Energy. Select a well adapted tree on their list and plant it according to their reasonable specifications and they will provide a rebate on your power bill. Applications and more information are available at your favorite nursery or on CPS Energy’s website at “www.cpsenergy.com. “