**“Twelve Months of Native Color”**

Through the years in this column, area gardeners have been introduced to the 12 months of color and the 12 months of low water-use color. The idea was to expand the palette of colorful plants that can be used in the landscape. The list of 12 months of low water-use color was important because it illustrated that a xeriscape landscape could still be lush and colorful.

The Bexar County Master Gardeners and I have a new list for you to consider — 12 months of native plant color. We constructed the list as part of the graywater demonstration at the Mitchell Lake Audubon Center. Our study team identified and planted 23 different native plants in bloom, or that have colored berries, during all 12 months of the year.

The advantage of using native plants in the landscape is they are capable of surviving the droughts and local pests without excessive irrigation or pesticides since they evolved in the local climate and soils.

Here is the entire list in case you are planning to change your landscape to be less dependent on irrigation. In future months, I will cover the plants more in detail.

For April, Mexican olive and cherry sage provide native plant color. The plants recommended for May color are mealy blue sage and Turks cap. In June, the first of the hot months, use Texas balloon flowers and cenizo. Experanza, “Gold Star,” and sunflower prosper in the July heat and provide good color. Use red yucca for August color. September is the month when summer transitions to fall. Plant purple coneflower for good color.

Mexican bush sage makes a good show in October. The plants recommended for November color are mint marigold and fall aster. Color in December is provided by gulf muhly. January is our coldest month on average, but possumhaw holly and beautyberry still provide color. In February, plant Carolina jasmine, Mexican redbud and spreading lavender lantana in the landscape to provide reliable color. March is the first month of spring. Texas gold columbine, bluebonnet, cross vine and Texas mountain laurel are good choices for March color.

Cherry sage is also called autumn sage or Salvia greggii. It has small red, pink, salmon or white blooms on stalks that rise out of the foliage. The evergreen leaves are mouse-ear shape and attractive with a light green waxy look.

As the alternate name suggests, cherry sage blooms in both the spring and the fall. The blooms are a favorite nectar source for hummingbirds. Deer do not seem to eat cherry sage. It blooms better in full sun but will survive in the shade as well. The plant grows to 5 or 6 feet tall and become leggy, so the best management strategy is to cut it back to the ground every 2 or 3 years.

The second plant identified for April is Mexican olive. This April, however, the 3-inch white blooms will not make an appearance on most trees. Mexican olive is native to the South so it is sensitive to cold weather like the area had this previous winter. Most defoliated and will probably not bloom until the fall.

Mexican olive makes a multi-stem tree that can grow to 25 feet tall but because of cold winters, most in San Antonio are about 15 feet tall and at least that wide.

Mexican olive is not a real olive and doesn’t look like an olive except for the nickel-size fruit it produces. Some wildlife eat the fruit but it does not seem to be a favorite wildlife food. Most winters the plant is evergreen with large gray-green thick leaves.

**“Garden Tasks”**

Keep alert for the migrating birds at your bird baths and feeders. Orioles, indigo buntings, painted buntings and warblers are especially colorful.

It is lawn mowing time. Service your lawn mower and sharpen the blade.

Plant tomatoes as soon as possible to allow fruit production before the summer heat shuts them down.

Plant okra and southern peas in the garden by seed. It is not too late to plant pepper transplants. Peppers are less sensitive to heat than tomatoes.