Gardening Q&A

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* Q. We planted sweet peas one month ago. They came up fast but have hunkered down now and are not growing up the trellis. We have fertilized them with slow-release lawn fertilizer. Any ideas?

1. Sweet peas are temperamental. It often seems it is either too hot or too cold for them. If the foliage looks green and healthy the plants will be sending out roots. Expect them to do some serious growth in February. The wait will be worth it!

* Q. We want to start our own tomato plants for the spring garden. When should we plant the seeds? Does it work to plant them in the peat pots in a southern exposure window?

1. It is time to start the seeds right now. It takes about 8 weeks to produce a transplant in the winter. It is easy to get the seeds to germinate. The biggest challenge is to have enough light available for the seedlings to develop without being spindly. Germinate them in the window but on warm days (over 45 degrees) set them out in full sun. A green house is a good option or lean a window against the house and place the seedlings under the window during the day. The transplants can be placed in the garden sometime after March 15.

* Q. You and Jerry Parsons are talking about the Sustainable Winter Turf on your Gardening South Texas Radio Show. If we mow the weeds instead of killing them with herbicides, won’t it contribute to the decline of the regular lawn grass?

1. In the situations we are talking about where it is too shady or we don’t have the water to irrigate adequately, the lawn has declined from other causes. In the absence of a thick summer lawn sod, control of annual bluegrass and horseherb is very difficult. Mowing the weeds results in an attractive winter groundcover and is a minor contributor to the further decline of the summer lawn.

* Q. We have oak wilt in our area. What are some alternatives to oaks that we can plant to diversify the tree population?

1. Oaks are among the best shade trees that are available. For many years horticulturists, including me, believed that the white oaks were not susceptible. In a recent conversation with Mark Huff the Regional Forester with Texas A&M Forest Service, he said white oaks such as lacey oak, post oak and even Mexican white oak will catch the disease. That leaves cedar elm, Mexican sycamore, Chinese pistache, and Montezuma cypress on the recommended shade tree list.

* Q. How long will cyclamen last in the garden? I hate to spend $5 on a plant if it is only going to bloom until April!

1. Yes, cost is one of the issues with cyclamen. In deep shade they will last until early May or perhaps June 1 if it is cool. . If you don’t have too many, one option is to place them in and east facing window in the air-conditioned house for the summer. They were originally house plants and will prosper in such a situation for several years. Or they can be moved back into the flower bed next winter.