

Gardening Q&A

Distribute 10-22-2018

Q. What are the red-flowered salvia that are blooming now in the shade. We didn't plant them, but they are very attractive, and the deer are not eating them.

A. The plant is *Salvia coccinea*. It is a perennial that reseeds itself and grows in sun and shade. It is also called tropical salvia and is available as a nursery transplant or seed variety in red, pink, and a bicolor with white. Hummingbird and butterflies seek out its nectar.

Q. Well, we allowed our tropical milkweed to continue to bloom and now we have caterpillars. We expected them to be Queens but there is both Queens and Monarchs. What should we do now? Will the caterpillars have enough time to mature and fly to their wintering ground in Mexico?

A. Some gardeners have collected the butterflies and enough milkweed foliage to allow them to grow and produce a cocoon in a terrarium-like container. I recommend that the caterpillars be allowed to mature in your landscape and follow their natural instincts at this point. Next year you could prune back the milkweed about October 1 if you wanted to prevent any fall Monarch reproduction.

Q. Is it a good time to plant sweet peas? We use a row of tomato cages for a trellis.

A. Yes, now is a good time to plant sweet peas. Soak the seed in water overnight and then plant the seed in a bed in full sun. Sweet peas are sensitive to cold weather and hot weather so some years they must be replanted. They can be replanted in San Antonio up to mid-February and still make a crop. Prepare the soil with 2 inches of compost and 1 cup of slow release lawn fertilizer for every 10 sq. ft of bed.

Q. What are the fastest growing, high quality shade trees?

A. In my experience Texas red oak, Mexican sycamore, and Mexican white oak are the fastest growing high-quality shade trees for our area. All three species are drought tolerant and relatively pest free.

Q. Our fall tomatoes are finally setting fruit. Will they mature before the winter freezes arrive?

A. With mild weather the fruit should size and ripen in 60 days, so your tomatoes should be ready to harvest one to 2 weeks after Thanksgiving. Just to be on the safe side get your freeze protection materials on station. Be ready to wrap a "Planket" or "Insulate" around the tomato cages if the temps are forecast to fall near freezing. A mechanic's light or poultry lamp make good heat sources if the temps will be colder.