

The week ahead

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| <p>TUESDAY
HEALTHY LIVING
SKI SEASON: These exercises will help you on the slopes this winter</p> | <p>WEDNESDAY
TASTE
LIKE MOM MADE: Local chefs share their favorite family recipes for Thanksgiving</p> | <p>NEXT WEEK
HOME
VIVID PATTERN: Shari Lidji hand makes personalized quilts, and her ranch-style home reflects her family's bright artistic vision</p> |
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Today on dallasnews.com

Plan the perfect Thanksgiving

☛ **Archive:** Start planning now, with our guide to what you can make ahead, new recipes to add to the mix and more for Thanksgiving.

dallasnews.com/thanksgiving



Holiday parties

☛ **Archive:** Get ahead on your entertaining plans with our guide to great parties.

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HOME

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Trees of life

Good will surrounds the Wilkinson Center auction of local celebs' trees and wreaths

WWDCD? (What would Dallas celebrities do?) In other parts of the country, you probably wouldn't want to know the answer to that question. Luckily, here in Dallas we have generous local designers, personalities and sports figures who like doing the right thing for a good cause. Tonight at the Tinsel and Dreams gala in Arlington Hall at Lee Park, 50 wreaths and Christmas trees will be auctioned to benefit the Wilkinson Center's poverty intervention programs for Dallas' underprivileged and high-crime neighborhoods. Event chairwoman Anne

Conner says she's thrilled with the response she's received from community figures who want to help. People including textiles designer Brooke Rydman, socialite Jimmie Westcott, jewelry designer Matthew Trent and former Dallas Cowboys quarterback Roger Staubach have contributed holiday pieces, which are up for grabs. "We are a young organization; this is just our third fundraiser," Mrs. Conner says. Tickets to tonight's gala are \$125 and may be purchased by calling Mrs. Conner at 214-321-5991 or by going to www.wilkinsoncenter.org.

Paige Phelps



The Wilkinson Center

This Roger Staubach-designed tree will be up for auction benefiting the Wilkinson Center.

CHORES

Add improvements while soil sleeps

By **RICK ROSEN**
Staff Writer
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When your plants go to sleep, it's time for you to get to work.

Because growth slows in fall and plants head toward dormancy, you'll have time to prepare a new garden bed, or to energize an existing one, so it's ready to plant in spring.

John J. Sloan, an associate professor and soil scientist at the Texas A&M University Agricultural Experiment Station in Dallas, notes that gardeners face two challenges with our soil.

First, it's high in clay, which makes it sticky when wet and rock-hard when dry. Second, it is predominantly calcareous, which means it has a high pH (pH is a measure of acidity or alkalinity). High pH soil, high in alkaline, ties up nutrients. "Plants have trouble getting certain nutrients they need," Dr. Sloan says.

The good thing about our soil: It is relatively fertile. Amending it with organic or inorganic products, or both, makes the soil easy to work with. "I mostly recommend adding organic matter," specifically, finished compost, says Dr. Sloan. "That's the single best thing you can do to improve your soil."

You can tell if your compost is finished if the edges of material are soft, says John Hunt, a master gardener and longtime member of First

Men's Garden Club of Dallas. If a twig in the compost bends, it is finished; if it snaps, it is not done decomposing.

Mr. Hunt, who recently lectured about preparing garden soil for winter, notes that another advantage to compost is that you can make your own. However, if you don't have time, buy it.

"The best program," he says, "is one that you will actually do."

Dr. Sloan of Texas A&M explains why he thinks the best amendment is compost:

Manure has fairly high levels of nutrients, which can throw the composition of your soil out of whack. Compost, he says, is fairly stable as far as nutrients. You can add more without building up the level of nutrients, especially phosphorus, to an unhealthy level.

Inorganic materials such as lava sand and greensand haven't shown the same benefits as compost, Dr. Sloan says. If using an inorganic material, be sure to use an equal amount of compost, he says.

Lavasand or greensand do add trace minerals to the soil, which is one reason many organic gardeners use them.

You can find out whether your soil lacks any needed minerals by getting a soil test done. County extension offices can mail soil-test kits to you.

Is pecan tree at risk after ivy dies?

The ivy growing on the pecan tree in our back yard died recently. The ivy in the alley adjacent to the pecan tree also died. Should I worry about the pecan tree or other plants in that area?

M.B., Dallas

The disease won't hurt the tree. The ivy probably died of a bacterial or fungal disease brought on by heavy spring rains followed by summer heat. This combination has affected many trees and other plants.

The loss of the ivy is good because you shouldn't let ivy grow on trees. Vines on the root flares and trunks of trees are almost as bad as having soil piled on the trunks. Ground cover plants and vines also should be kept pulled back from the bases of trees. Fall and winter is the perfect time to do this work.

If you replant the area, use Persian ivy rather than English ivy. It is a superior plant. Add lots of compost, lava sand, corneal, organic fertilizer and dry molasses to the soil before planting.

I have plants hanging from a red oak tree in the front yard. I put decorative chains over some of the branches and hung the pots from the chains. I see that the tree has grown around the chains such that they are really part of the tree now. Is there anything I should do about this?

H.B., Dallas

Nothing should be wrapped around limbs or trunks. Now that the tree has grown over part of the chain, all you can do is cut away the loose part of the chain with bolt cutters and leave the rest.

If you plan to hang plants from trees, use an eye bolt through the limb or screw a hook into the bottom of the limb. One hole does less damage than anything wrapping around parts of the tree.

ORGANIC ANSWERS



HOWARD GARRETT
home@dallasnews.com

I am interested in a wildflower called bluebells that grows in Central Texas. I don't see it on your Web site.

J.H., Sherman

Thanks for reminding me that this wonderful wildflower isn't on my Web site. It will be added, and it is covered in my books *Howard Garrett's Plants for Texas and Texas Gardening the Natural Way*.

One reason bluebells aren't seen much in the wild is that people pick them, which reduces the populations.

We are growing okra for the first time, and we've been impressed at how big the okra is. But when we cook the okra in soups, it is very tough. Are we picking the okra too late? Is there something we can add to the soil to make the okra more tender?

C.G., Flower Mound

It's all a matter of picking the okra while it is young. Okra matures very quickly and must be picked daily so that it won't become large and tough.

My compost heap is more than a year old, but I still see eggshells in it. Can I use this on my garden beds for the winter?

M.M., Fort Worth

Yes, and to speed the breakdown of eggshells in the future, grind them in a coffee grinder before putting them into the compost pile.

I am pretty sure our holly trees are suffering from blight. The

leaves turn dark brown to black rapidly and fall off. What should I do?

J.A., Dallas

I've never heard of a holly blight. Make sure the area around the trees drains well, remove excess soil from the base of each tree, and use my Sick Tree Treatment. Also make sure the soil is not too dry.

How can I protect Mexican lime trees during the winter? I planted them last fall and thought they didn't survive. But in the middle of the summer, they had new growth.

K.M., Dallas

These citrus trees are sensitive to cold weather, so in Dallas you need a protected place such as a greenhouse during winter. Growing the tree in a pot and moving it indoors is the best solution.

Draping trees outdoors with floating row covers will protect them from mild freezes, but a structure with warmth is all that will work during hard freezes.

I am trying to grow elderica pines at my daughter's house in central California. I have been using drip irrigation for a few years, and the trees are about 4 feet tall. They are planted in clay soil. Should I stop all irrigation or lengthen the watering intervals?

B.A., Dallas

Reduce irrigation as much as you can. Eldarica pine is a desert tree and can be killed with too much water.

RESOURCES

ONLINE: www.dirtdoctor.com for free organic-program handouts

RADIO: KSKY-AM (660), Saturday 11 a.m.-noon and Sunday 8-11 a.m. www.ksky.com.

MAIL: P.O. Box 140650, Dallas, TX 75214

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Soil scientists have discovered that expanded shale is an ideal additive to improve our clay soil's drainage.

The exception is existing garden beds. That's because expanded shale works only underground. For existing beds, Mr. Hunt recommends spreading a layer of compost topped with mulch.

GARDENING FOOL

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The Gardening Fool column will return next week.

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