

The Dirt on Hill Country Gardening

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Mulching Away

We're short on rainfall for this time of year, and we need to be sure plants get watered with some regularity. We're just trying to keep the ground from getting very dry, and we're not trying to spur plants into growth by extra watering. Our best ally is mulch to keep even moisture in the root zone.

Trees and hardy shrubs Mulch at least 2 to 3 inches around the drip zone. Don't strangle the tree by mulching up the trunk. Start your mulch at ground level and mulch out from the tree just past the drip line with the density maintaining the 2-3 inches once you're a foot or so away from the trunk. This should retain moisture, keep weeds down, and moderate the soil temperature in the entire root zone through winter. Reapply in the spring to maintain at least 2 to 3 inches year round.

Shrubs and perennials susceptible to freeze damage Mulch at least 2 to 4 inches covering the lower crown of the plant. Cover from this point to the edge of the root zone (or 3 to 4 feet) with the same 2 to 4 inches of mulch. This goes a long way to keeping the soil temperature warm enough to prevent freezing for those plants that are susceptible. In the spring, rake the mulch away from the crown of the plant outward toward the edge of the root zone. Then we'll apply additional mulch to keep a continual 2 to 4 inches around the plants. Mulch protects the crown in the winter, but it can harbor insects and disease where the crown and soil meet during the growing season.

Tender perennials (Mexican bush sage, Indigo spires, Turk's cap, and others that freeze back to the roots). Cut the plants back to about 2 to 3 inches from the ground and completely cover with mulch for 2 to 3 feet. This will insulate the roots and enable them to overwinter in the best possible way. Again, this will be raked away from the crown in the spring and additional mulch will be applied to the root zone.

Roses Don't prune this time of year, but apply a loose mulch around the crown that is about 6 inches high. This will cover the lower stem and be mounded up, tapering off to nothing in about 2 feet distance. In the spring after the last freeze when we prune the roses, we'll rake the mulch away from the crown, but leave it around the root zone, just not strangling the stems.

Personal Plant of the Week. Recommended plant of the week is the Rough-Leaf Dogwood (*Cornus drummondii*). This one is a great understory tree that does well in shade. It is particularly desirable for erosion control along the river. It spreads by rhizomes and runners, but it fairly easily controlled. Growing 15 to 20 feet tall, this tree produces beautiful, white berries and colorful foliage in the fall. The birds particularly love this tree. The blossom comes in late spring and is large and white. Its name comes from the texture of the bottom of its leaves which is sandpaper-like. This is another underutilized plant.

Chores for this week.

- Mulch, mulch, mulch, mulch, and mulch.
- Plant cold tolerant plants and trees.
- Plant your pansies, kale, snapdragons, stock and other cold-hardy annuals.
- Wrap your water faucets.
- Remove sprinklers from the ends of hoses, and ideally put your hoses in the garage.
- Ready, set, freeze...

We encourage your questions, comments, or your own "Personal Plant of the Week" by writing David at dsteiny@ktc.com.