

The Dirt on Hill Country Gardening

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Wild Animal Damage!

This time of year we're spending less time looking at our plants and trees, and sometimes the varmints can do untold damage while our backs are turned. If you drive along the Guadalupe River out past Ingram and look at the magnificent cypress trees along the way, you'll get a clear visual of what the beaver population is doing. They are crafty devils that sneak out at night and rip big hunks of bark off the trees. If they rip it off all around and actually girdle the tree, it will die. This is a HUGE problem, and their population seems to be exploding. If the tree is small, they will actually fell it, small being a caliper of 6 inches or so. The remedy is difficult as they have an acute sense of smell so they'll steer clear of any trap on land. Sometimes you can catch them in a trap in the river, but you might also catch a neighboring dog. Staying up all night until you happen to see one to eliminate is an alternative, but this gets tiresome.

To protect the trees, you might try encircling it with loose chicken wire to preclude their getting to the back. This works well, but it isn't too aesthetic.

Other evil-doers are the deer that rub their horns on trunks of small trees. They can easily girdle a tree in a night if the caliper is small, and this will kill the tree. To protect small trees, you might resort to light colored tree guards or wire cages that are tall enough to keep them out. Warning here, if the cages are not pretty sturdy and well anchored, the deer will just topple and crush them. Do not use black, flexible poly pipe because it will cook your tree trunk when summer gets here.

Our next least favorite varmints are porcupines, black squirrels, armadillos, and rabbits. The porcupines climb trees and girdle fairly large branches, killing the branches entirely. They also damage dogs that get in their way. These are difficult to eliminate, short of murder, and they are not afraid of anything. Black squirrels are sneaky, little rodents that dig things up and often girdle the bottom of small plants and kill them. They are disastrous for newly planted annuals and young vegetables. These can be deterred with a solution of ground red pepper, the hotter the better sprayed or just broadcast around the base of plants.

Armadillos are also diggers that uproot newly planted annuals and any small plants in soft dirt. They will actually eat the root system, killing these plants. Trapping them is a solution. They stay close to the ground and close to walls or edging so place your trap along their route where they'll simply walk into it. They also like grubs, and ground pepper is a deterrent. They prefer plants in good, humusy soil.

Peter Rabbit and his friends are after tender plants and vegetables. Best to fence your garden with chicken wire at the bottom to just keep them out. Pepper spray also works on these.

green color, and it bears open clusters of nodding, bell-shaped flowers that are coral, pink or white. These are continuous bloomers, and their clump is compact and dense. They make a great edging or groundcover for shady spots. They can tolerate full morning sun, but don't let the west sun blister them. Once established, these are quite drought tolerant.

Chores for this week.

- Thistles and other weeds are already starting, so get your 20% vinegar solution out and just spray them while they're small and while the temperature is above 70 and the sun is shining.
- Find your fire-ant mounds in this dry period and stir them up a bit, then sprinkle with agricultural diatomaceous earth. This is very effective right now.
- Prepare for cold weather. It really will get here one of these days to abort the cedar pollen problem.
- Spread a pre-emergent, such as corn gluten meal to keep weed seeds from sprouting in the late winter and early spring.
- Plant all kinds of trees.
- Start pruning trees and use a mixture of wood glue and water to paint on all open cuts.

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