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SAWS plants a guide to South Texas landscaping

By Kay O'Donnell March 11, 2006 Publication: San Antonio Express-News (TX) Page: 01E Word Count: 794

Those who garden here -- and there are many -- know the joys and the challenges that come with our climate and growing conditions. Mild winters mean we're growing at least 10 months of the year, if not year-round.

But erratic weather patterns and less-than-ideal soils can be perplexing. Throw in the current drought, and green moods can turn brown quickly, especially for novice gardeners and those new to the area.

Take heart, though. A new guidebook can help. It also promises to help you conserve water and save money. And the book, published by San Antonio Water System, is free.

"San Antonio Landscape Care Guide" takes a seasonal approach to gardening in its 52 pages of text and color photographs.

"We wanted to show that you can have a gorgeous, lush, pretty landscape and still get through a drought," said Karen Guz, SAWS conservation director and editor of the guide.

SAWS will distribute the guide during Spring Bloom, its annual garden event, from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. today at the utility's new headquarters, 2800 U.S. 281 N. SAWS requires guide recipients to sign a form pledging to try to use the book and indicating they have not already received a copy.

"It helps us track inventory and, by signing the pledge, people seem to take (water

conservation) more seriously," Guz said.

The idea for the guide grew out of the conservation department's awareness that many SAWS customers were overwatering their landscapes.

"Some of the people in our various programs were not very successful at conserving water," Guz said. The specific problem, the department found, was in landscape watering.

"Our weather is unique, our rain patterns are different, our soil is different," and for nonnatives, this can lead to confusion in the garden, she said.

Guz, a licensed irrigator, handled the sections on water herself. For other topics, she enlisted the help of area pros.

Mark Peterson of the Texas Forest Service tackles the subject of trees. Among other things, he offers "Five Rules for a Healthy, Long-Lived Tree" in which he says to "select only native or well-adapted trees for our area which have unblemished single trunks, firm root balls and more branches than clear trunk."

Other contributors include Calvin Finch, SAWS water resources director; Judit Green, a wildlife biologist with Texas Parks & Wildlife; and three horticulturists, two from Texas Cooperative Extension and one from the San Antonio Botanical Garden.

The guide takes a seasonal approach to landscape care, presenting maintenance checklists for annuals, perennials, grass, trees, roses and herbs.

It then addresses the same seven topics for each season: seasonal stars, care checklists, past peak plants, watering guidelines, pruning guidelines, wildscape guidelines and guest articles.

All the information is designed to be easy to find within the guide, with advice and tips available at your fingertips.

The book is "written for the average homeowner who is not a master gardener," Guz said.

With this in mind, the guide offers a section at the end titled "Garden Problem Solver" to help with areas such as watering, pesticide use and fertilizing, said Dana Nichols, SAWS conservation planner.

"We know that people have the right plant materials," she said, "now the trick is getting them to learn how to take care of these plants."

Oftentimes, problems can be traced to a homeowner simply overlooking the seasonal connection to a plant's cycle, Guz said.

Her advice? "Enjoy each season for what it is," she said, explaining that just because a plant doesn't look good in winter doesn't mean it needs more water, it's simply not that plant's time to shine.

With vivid photography, the guide illustrates what plants should look like when they're in their prime.

"As we wrote the book," Nichols said, "we wanted to communicate that a low-water use landscape isn't all rock and cactus, unless that's what you want." Instead, she said, they set out to produce "a very colorful, lush publication."

The book also is being sold at a few retail sites, such as the San Antonio Botanical Garden gift shop, Milberger's Nursery and Fanick's Garden Center. And an HTML version of the book is planned for the SAWS Web site.

What:

The new 'San Antonio Landscape Care Guide,' published by San Antonio Water System, will be distributed at Spring Bloom, the annual garden festival sponsored by the utility. Events include short talks by area garden experts and a plant sale. Each of the first 2,000 people will receive a free xeriscape plant.

When:

9 a.m.-1 p.m. today.

Where:

SAWS headquarters, 2800 U.S. 281 N. at Mulberry Avenue.

More info:

www.saws.org or (210) 704-7297.

Spring Bloom

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