

TEXAS A&M AGRI LIFE EXTENSION



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Making a Difference In Tarrant County



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It's Tax Season

Marian Ross
County Extension Agent
Family & Community Health



Happy New Year! Ready to tackle your 2017 taxes? Hopefully, you spent time each month collecting, filing and reviewing items that are needed. Below is a calendar to assist in making the tax preparation better.

Tax Preparation Calendar

January

- Gather records & review
- Organize
- Double check W2s, 1099s

April

- File copy in current year file
- Review ways to reduce your taxes
 - Sources of taxable income
 - Reductions and credits you can take
- Do you need to start or increase donations over the year?

July

- Investigate tax credits
- Are you eligible for any tax credits you are not aware of?
- Are you keeping receipts that are tax deductions?

October

- Consult tax advisor about any end year tax planning savings
- Extension payments are due the 11th

February

- Deliver tax records to qualified tax return preparer or make appointment at AARP, free sites or VITA
- Self-preparing? Study this year's forms and instructions
- Begin working on your tax return

May

- Review investments & other sources of income.
- Can you reduce taxable income without sacrificing economic yield?
- Investigate additional contributions to employer - sponsored retirement plan, thereby reducing taxable income & deferring tax on income generated by investment plan.

August

- Review tax record keeping practices
- Know what is needed each year as you prepare for filing season
- Have you donated clothing or home furnishing to a charity?
- Collect receipts.

November

- The IRS will release changes to the upcoming tax year
- Review to see if it will affect you.

March

- Review tax forms before e-filing or mailing Refund? Mail/e-file immediately
- Owe? Send form and check just before April 15 Extension? File as soon as possible

June

- Review expenses
- Can you increase your deductions without unwarranted costs?

September

- Estimate tax liability for the year and compare it with withholding. If needed, change your withholding.
- Only donate to reputable charities or 501(c)3 organizations

December

- Take time to review tax paperwork.
- Make appointment with a qualified tax preparer - beat the rush.

Tax Related Identity Theft:

With nearly 145 million Americans' names, addresses and Social Security numbers being involved in a data breach, everyone needs to be vigilant. There are protections that are in place that both the IRS and the states have put in place. One of those is that the IRS will NOT call a person in relation to their taxes.

A few signs your identity could have been used to file taxes: an electronically filed tax return gets rejected because a taxpayer's SSN has been filed; taxpayer receives a letter from the IRS confirming a tax return is being held for review; taxpayer receives a notice from the IRS indicating that they owe additional tax, have a refund offset or have a collection action for a year in which they didn't file a tax return; taxpayer receives a notice from the IRS that they received wages from an employer for whom the taxpayer did not work.



Back row left to right: Scott Shelby, Johnny Balderamos, Bryan Howard, Joe L. Hernandez, Susan Strange, The Honorable JD Johnson, Pct. 4, Constable Joe D. Johnson and Facilities Director David Phillips, Front row left to right: Devin Skinner, Sandra Taylor, Kim Bozeman, Charles Cole, and Christopher Burns

Friend of Extension Award

Tarrant County Graphics Department

The Friend of Extension Award recognizes an individual or organization for outstanding service to the people of Tarrant County by their exceptional support and personal involvement in Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service.



John South Spirit of Extension Award

Melinda Adams

The John South Spirit of Extension Award recognizes a program area committee member for exemplary service in the design and delivery of educational programs which enhance the quality of life for the people of Tarrant County.



Director's Award

Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge

The Director's Award recognizes an individual or organization for providing exemplary support for Extension educational programs and volunteers.



Darlene Myatt Friend of Children Award

Georgi Roberts

The Darlene Myatt Friend of Children Award recognizes an individual or organization for dedicating time, talents and treasure to teaching children with dynamic enthusiasm and loving leadership.

Stevia: The Sweet Facts

Robin Hall
Extension Agent
Expanded Food & Nutrition Education Program



Low-calorie or zero-calorie sweeteners have grown in popularity over the years. In a category called “nonnutritive sweeteners,” these products offer sweetness to your foods and beverages, but virtually no nutrition. Some popular nonnutritive sweeteners include saccharin, aspartame, and sucralose, but stevia is the newest sweetener to gain popularity. Little research has been done on stevia; however stevia has earned the Generally Recognized as Safe status, which means it does not require approval from the Food and Drug Administration to be used as a food additive.

What is Stevia?

Stevia refers to a high-purity stevia leaf extract from the stevia plant, *Stevia rebaudiana* Bertoni. The stevia plant is native to Paraguay, where historically, the leaves have been chewed for their sweet taste, and used both as medicine, and to sweeten beverages. Today, the sweetness from the stevia plant is taken from the leaves through a process of extraction, filtration, and dehydration, producing a plant-based sweetener that is 200 to 350 times sweeter than sugar.

Safety

Many studies indicate that stevia is safe for adults and children, including people with diabetes, and women who are pregnant or nursing. The Joint Food and Agriculture Organization/World Health Organization Expert Committee on Food Additives has established an Acceptable Daily Intake of stevia of about 12 mg highly purified stevia extract per kilogram of body weight, per day. That is the equivalent of a 150-lb person consuming 40 packs of tabletop stevia sweetener daily. To know if a product contains stevia, look on the ingredients label for stevia leaf extract, stevia, stevia extract, rebaudioside A, Reb A, or steviol glycosides.

Stevia and Health

Weight Management: Some randomized controlled trials have suggested that substituting foods and beverages sweetened with nonnutritive sweeteners, like stevia, for their regular-calorie version results in modest weight loss.

Diabetes: Studies have found no negative effects from stevia on blood sugar levels.

Food Allergies: It has been concluded that there are no known allergies associated with stevia extracts used in foods and beverages.

Uses

Stevia is available in powdered and liquid form for use as a sweetener under brand names including SPLENDA Naturals Stevia Sweetener, Truvia, and PureVia. It is often used in combination with other sweeteners due to the bitter aftertaste it can leave when used alone. Stevia is also found in many food products such as Dannon Oikos Triple Zero Greek Nonfat Yogurt, Coca-Cola Life, and Vitamin Water.

Stevia can be used in any baked or heated food or beverage; ¼ cup of powdered stevia provides the same level of sweetness as 1 cup of sugar. Unlike sugar however, stevia does not promote browning or contribute to the texture of baked items. Therefore, some recipes may require a mix of sugar and stevia to attain the desired taste and texture.

Recommendations

Based on what’s known right now, stevia sweetener is considered a safe choice for anyone trying to curb their sugar intake. Because it is a relatively new addition to the nonnutritive sweetener market, more research is needed before the long-term effects of stevia consumption are known.

Reference

Article adapted from Webb, Denise. “Stevia’s Splendor.” *Today’s Dietitian*, 19, 6, June 2017. pp. 19-21.



Mulch: Low technology, High impact!

Steve Chaney
County Extension Agent
Horticulture

Mulch is simply a layer of material covering the soil surface around plants. There is nothing glamorous about mulch, but it is by far the lowest-technology, highest-impact gardening practice of all!!!

The primary benefit of mulching is water conservation, but it also does the following:

- Reduces soil erosion (especially vital on slopes) from wind and rain, protecting your soil preparation investment.
- Moderates soil temperatures by keeping soils warmer in winter and cooler in summer. (Buy an inexpensive meat thermometer and measure your bare soil during the middle of summer, you will be shocked!)
- Reduces weed populations by keeping weed seed in the dark, smothering weeds, restricting weed growth, or simply making them easier to pull.
- Reduces soil borne plant diseases by preventing rain or irrigation water from splashing soil fungi up onto the stems, foliage, flowers, and fruit.
- Provides organic matter to the soil by decomposing into the soil or with tilling into the soil annually.
- Creates aesthetically pleasing soil covering (research at WSU has indicated that a newly mulched bed with no plants has nearly the same aesthetic rating as a bed filled with plants. What were not acceptable were weedy beds.)

Mulches can be organic materials, such as shredded bark, compost, recycled paper, pine straw, and wood chips; or inorganic materials, such as a chipped granite, lava rock, limestone, woven plastic, river rock, and even recycled chipped tires.

Organic mulches are preferred by most, but rock mulches have their place as well in our landscapes. Take a hint from the natural environment in your area. Pine straw mulch looks natural in East Texas where there are lots of native pines. Stone and rock mulches are natural in West Texas. Yet a constructed arroyo (streambed, dry or wet) can be a great landscape addition throughout Texas. Organic mulches still have the advantage over rock mulches in most situations. Organic mulches decompose and add organic matter back to the soil. They also reflect less sunlight, reducing heat loads on plants and surrounding buildings. The disadvantages of organic mulches are they can wash away during heavy rains and they need to be replenished annually.

One of most often asked questions about the use of mulch is: Can mulching with sawdust or wood chips rob nitrogen from the soil? The answer is yes they can rob nitrogen from the soil because the microorganisms use nitrogen to decompose the sawdust or wood chips in question. No big problem! Simply add some nitrogen fertilizer to your plantings to compensate for what’s used to finish breaking down the material. The many benefits far outweigh the extra step and then as the mulch breaks down into the soil it gives you a slow release nitrogen bath for many months to come! So if you have an inexpensive source of sawdust or wood chips, then by all means use it!

One last comment on mulch, there are many out there to choose from, it’s up to you what you use, just use it! There are lots of colored and dyed mulches out there that often cost more for the color, just remember the dye will fade out in our hot temperatures so probably not the best choice unless you want to re-dye it! My favorite saying in the landscape business is “Compost once, Mulch forever.”

Happy Gardening in 2018 my friends!!!

Preventing Theft of Landscape Equipment

Laura M. Miller
County Extension Agent
Horticulture



The theft of landscape equipment is often thought of as a crime of opportunity. Equipment is outdoors, there is no one around, or at least no one who is paying attention, and without much planning a would-be thief can easily grab an easily transportable item that can easily be sold or pawned.

While this is clearly larceny, defined in the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) as the unlawful taking, carrying, leading or riding away (which was probably originally mostly about horses but could now refer to riding mowers) of property from the possession, or constructive possession of another person, it doesn't include any other crimes such as burglary or even trespass. This can result in law enforcement agencies tending to prioritize other types of crimes that both they and the public see as more significant.

But what if the piece of equipment was 40 feet long by 13 feet high and weighed in at around 75,000 lbs. with an estimated value of \$370,000? That's what went missing from the City of Fort Worth Rolling Hills compound the last weekend of October 2017 when a Morbark tub grinder was taken from a fenced area. While the tub grinder was the largest and most expensive piece of equipment taken, Forestry Crew Leader Will Pemberton reports that after a 20 plus year period with no significant losses of equipment to theft, the compound was broken into five times between April and December of 2017. In addition to the giant tub grinder, on different occasions thieves cut through fences and took leaf blowers, string trimmers, chain saws, tools, and even a 4-ton pallet jack. Items were taken from vehicles and from buildings, and the previously mentioned fences along with locks and toolboxes were damaged.

These thefts occurred on weekends and no one was at the worksite, but two employees of Outdoor Inspirations Lawn and Landscape in Snellville, GA were on the job in April when they noticed someone trying to open the door of an enclosed truck. The thwarted thief fired four rounds at them before leaving empty handed. This serious threat to employee safety should make everyone take landscape equipment theft a little more seriously.

Steps to Safeguard Equipment and Employees:

- Keep an accurate inventory. For each piece of equipment, take a photo and record:
 - Serial or VIN number—if none exists, engrave a number
 - Make and Model
 - Date and location of purchase
 - Warranty information
 - Authorized users
- Use security lighting, fencing, and signage. Under Texas Penal Code § 30.05 the definition of criminal trespass is more complex than the simple notion of being on someone else's land. One way to commit the offense is to enter upon another's property even though one has notice that the entry is forbidden. Notice can be given fence or other enclosure obviously designed to exclude intruders, or in the form of sign(s) posted on the property or at the entrance to the building, reasonably likely to be noticed, indicating that entry is forbidden. Readily visible purple paint marks no less than eight inches in length and one inch in width and placed 3-5 ft. from the ground on trees or posts spaced no more than 100 feet apart can also be used. Criminal trespass is normally a Class B misdemeanor with a fine up to \$2,000 and a jail term up to 180 days. Security lighting isn't notification, but it makes it easier to see those signs.
- Store as much as possible inside a building. That makes it less visible to those opportunistic passersby. It also means that anyone who enters the building intending to steal is committing the crime of burglary before taking anything. Remove batteries from battery operated equipment and recharge or store them separately from the equipment they power. Have visible, designated spots for everything so that missing items are immediately noticeable.
- Have employees wear uniforms. Uniforms make it easy to spot a person who is out of place.
- Have equipment wear uniforms. Steve McLaughlin of Greenscape in Fort Worth paints every item from a 6-inch screwdriver to 6-foot trailer with Greenscape's signature green and yellow stripes. While a little spray paint won't necessarily prevent theft, it does make stolen items easy to identify.
- If it has wheels, use extra caution, because thieves will make them roll. According to the FBI's National Crime Information Center, 43% of equipment thefts are riding mowers or garden tractors, with an additional 17% in the loader category. If a thief can steal something that can be used to steal something else, it is especially valuable. Front end loaders are often stolen so that they can be used to steal ATM machines. Derek Whisenand at Whiz-Q Stone in Fort Worth has experience with this unfortunate occurrence. Trailers, especially fully loaded landscape trailers, can also make for extremely efficient thievery. Trailer hitch locks are relatively inexpensive and effective. GPS tracking devices are becoming as widely available and inexpensive as trailer hitch locks. Because many lots of equipment comes with generic keys, including tub grinders; consider rekeying or adding an additional level of security for ignition.



A Resolution to Consider...

Shannon Johnson-Lackey
4-H Extension Agent
Cooperative Extension Program

A new year often means new resolutions. According to Wikipedia, "A New Year's resolution is a tradition, most common in the Western Hemisphere...in which a person resolves to change an undesired trait or behavior, to accomplish a personal goal or otherwise improve their life". Some common resolutions that people make are to get in shape, eat right, save money, quit smoking or volunteer. They may also aim to seek more education or improve their mental well-being by thinking positive and laughing more. At the beginning, everyone is energized and ready to be a better version of them. This is a time of increased awareness, when gyms report record numbers in new membership, financial management and healthy eating classes are at capacity and non-profits who rely on volunteers enjoy a larger network of helping hands.

While all of these things are important, maybe we should all RESOLVE TO PLAY MORE. Think back to simpler days when hours were spent outdoors playing numerous games and having countless adventures. A time when TV and technology did not consume us, when entertainment came in the form of something created not bought. Resolve to put down that phone, play more. You may enjoy some benefits such as getting in shape from all of the running and jumping as well as increased family bonding by trying one of the games detailed below. These games were tested with great success at a 4-H Military Camp. Happy Playing!

The following ideas were found on stuningames.com. These were outlined in the Top 20 Minute to Win It Games article on the site.

1. Stack Attack
Materials Needed: 36 Plastic Cups (the Solo type work best)
Instructions:
 - a) When the clock starts, player may begin stacking cups into a pyramid shape.
 - b) When the triangle is complete, with 1 cup at the top, 2 cups below it, and so on, the player may begin to get the cups into a single stack.
 - c) To complete the game, the player must build a complete pyramid using all of the cups, then get all the cups back into a single stack within the 60-second time limit.
2. Junk In The Trunk
Materials Needed: 8 Ping Pong Balls, empty tissue box, belt (you can also use rope) Instructions:
 - a) Fill the tissue box with ping-pong balls, then attach tissue box to the back of belt. Put on the belt with the tissue box sitting at the small of the back.
 - b) When the clock starts, player may begin moving body to shake the ping-pong balls out.
 - c) Player's hands or arms may not touch the box or belt.
 - d) Player may only touch the floor with his or her feet.
 - e) To complete the game, player must get all 8 ping-pong balls out of the box within the 60-second time limit.

Do the Right Thing: Leadership, Work, and Service

Kent DeCardenas
County Extension Agent
4-H



Early last this year, a retired gentleman quietly passed away with little notice other than from his family and friends. It took the New York Times four months to learn and report on his death. Yet, despite the tardiness, the Times did print an obituary in order to pay respects to a truly great and noble man.

Stanislav Petrov was 77 at his passing but it was a single decision he made at age 44 that caused many major newspapers around the world to mark his passing. Back in 1983, Petrov was a lieutenant colonel in the Soviet Air Defense Forces. His duty on the morning of September 26th was to report to his commanding officers if the Soviet Union's warning systems detected an attack.

On this particular morning, the system did detect an attack of five missiles coming from the Midwest of the US. Had Petrov followed his orders, he would have immediately passed the notice along. However, Petrov felt that there was some sort of mistake. His training had told him that an attack would have many more missiles. For several minutes, time that could spell the end of his country, Petrov led his team in examining the situation and the data they were receiving. In the end he did notify his commanders but warned that it was a system error.



Photo courtesy of Nikolai Ignatiev / Alamy Stock Photo.

Of course, he was correct. The warning system had mistaken sunlight on clouds over the Dakotas as a missile launch. With such a service rendered one would expect Petrov to have been awarded and praised. Instead, he was written up for not taking proper notes during the incident. As Petrov explained, he couldn't write anything down because he had a phone in one hand and an intercom in another. In other words, he was doing his job.

The parents, club managers, and volunteers who make 4-H possible all work to provide hands-on-learning, leadership training, and community service opportunities to the youth members. The 400+ 4-H members learn how to work hard to accomplish a task. They learn how to work with a team and steer them to the right course of action. And they perform their work as a service for themselves and others. Through these types of activities 4-H members grow into leaders. 4-H'ers always step-up and do the job before them. And sometimes there is no reward, but this is what 4-H youth and leaders do.

4-H teaches that doing your job in a way that makes the best better, even if your effort goes unappreciated, will make you a leader that others will aspire to be. Petrov was never in 4-H, but his example stands for all of its members as they grow into leaders.

For more information on Petrov, see the New York Times article at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/18/world/europe/stanislav-petrov-nuclear-war-dead.html>.

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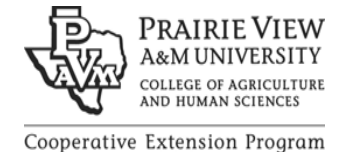
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