

In Our Coastal Gardens



Native and Adapted Plants for the Coastal Bend

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Contents

The Coastal Bend Environment	3
Plan to be Earth Kind	4
Maintenance	5
Plant Selection	6
Large Trees —Over 30 feet high.	7-8
Small Trees — Up to 30 feet high.	9-10
Large Shrubs — Woody multi-stemmed plants more than 10 feet tall	11-12
Medium Shrubs — Woody multi-stemmed plants 5-9 feet tall.	13-14
Small Shrubs — Woody multi-stemmed plants less than 4 feet tall	15-18
Vines — Plants requiring support to climb	19-20
Groundcovers —Herbaceous non-grass plants that grow and spread to cover the ground.	21-22
Ornamental Grasses —Bunchgrasses used a garden accents	23-24
Tropicals —Plants native to frost-free areas near the equator	25-26
Palms & Cycads —hardy, half-hardy, tender.	27-28
Annuals —Plants that live for one season or one year.	29-30
Perennials —Herbaceous plants that live for more than one year.	31-35
Other Plants to Try.	36
For More Information.	36
Invasive Plants —Do Not Plant	37-39
Photo Credits.	40

The Aransas/San Patricio Master Gardeners welcome you to the Coastal Bend!

We prepared this plant selection guide to help you adapt your old gardening techniques to the coastal environment.

You're close to water, whether that water is in a marsh, a pond, a creek, a bay, or the water table that may be just a few inches beneath your feet. Because no one wants to swim in chemical soup or dine on toxic trout, gardeners here must be especially careful to keep yard waste, fertilizer, herbicides and pesticides out of the watershed.

Plant selection is only part of the process of creating a beautiful, functional landscape that is easy on you and easy on the environment in which you live. First, take a close look at your surroundings.

The Coastal Bend Environment

It's drier than it looks

Average rainfall here is only about 30 inches per year, which is much less than Houston gets (47 in.), less than Victoria (39 in.), and even less than Dallas or Austin. Afternoon summer showers that are the daily pattern in other Gulf Coast locations are not the rule here.

When we do get rain, it is not delivered in inch-at-a-time increments. Wait for a multi-inch rain event before you add expensive bedding plants or trees. You may need to redirect water from your house or other structures, and you may want to install raised beds for those plants that require good drainage.

Not everyone has sand

Dig a few holes in your yard to find out what kind of soil you have. The soil in your yard may be sand, sand with a clay layer underneath it, or deep, black clay. In the same neighborhood, soil pH varies from quite alkaline to acid enough for azaleas to grow without soil amendments. The only way to know what you have to work with is to test the soil. Soil test kits are available at the Extension Office. Cost is minimal and well worth it, considering the money you'll save not buying unnecessary soil amendments.

Warm and windy, too

Aransas and San Patricio County are in USDA Zone 9. Tender tropical plants may grow well for several years, but they will be greatly damaged or killed in a severe cold snap. On the other hand, our winter is too mild for plants that require many hours of chilling to produce flowers and fruit, and some plants that enjoy the mild winter can't tolerate months of heat. For an updated hardiness zone map, consult www.arborday.org/media/zones.cfm.

A major feature of our climate is the prevailing southeast wind. The wind is enough of a factor that newly-planted shrubs and trees must be staked, unless they are planted in protected locations. Constant wind plus high temperatures can kill new plants in a hurry. If you need to be convinced of the power of the wind, observe the wind-swept live oaks on Fulton Beach Road in Rockport and Fulton: they're our claim to fame.

Save the trees

Quality native trees add to the value of a property. Trees adjusting to the constant wind or salt spray take on unusual shapes or produce branches in unexpected places. Do not assume that a misshapen tree is diseased. It may simply have character! Use this guide to identify which trees you want to keep.

Save the understory

Do not change the soil level around an existing tree in the area from the tree's trunk to the edge of its canopy. Tidy up, rather than remove, plants that grow under existing native trees. This will eliminate the difficult task of trying to establish groundcover plants in dry shade. Native understory plants require little or no maintenance and seldom need supplemental water. Best of all, these plants provide food and habitat for desirable birds and butterflies. The plant selection guide identifies the understory plants you'll want to keep.

Get acquainted with the natives

If you are landscaping a previously undisturbed homesite, remember that native plants are, by definition, perfectly adapted to the area. In rainy years, they flourish; in dry ones, they survive without supplemental water. There is a healthy diversity of native trees, for example, besides the live oaks everyone recognizes. Use this plant selection guide to get acquainted with the desirable native plants that you already have on your property.

Plan to be Earth Kind

Once you are acquainted with your surroundings and have paid a few water bills, you are ready to plan a landscape that requires minimal water, fertilizer, herbicide or pesticide to thrive. Texas AgriLife Extension offers Earth Kind landscaping classes to help you design a beautiful landscape that fits your needs, suits your neighborhood, conserves water, reduces the need for fertilizer and pesticide, and reduces the amount of yard waste going to the landfill.

Take it easy on turf

Turfgrass requires more water, chemicals and labor on the part of the gardener than most other landscape plants, so you may want to limit the amount of landscape devoted to grass. Odd-shaped areas are difficult to irrigate with automatic equipment, so those areas are natural candidates for drought-tolerant shrubs, perennials or annuals. On a small lot, it is possible to surround paths and outdoor living spaces with deeply mulched shrub and flower beds and skip the lawn (and lawn care) entirely.

Bring out the rain barrel

Now is the time to explore rainwater harvesting. Modern rain barrel or cistern systems are inexpensive, lightweight and easy to maintain. Screens will keep pests and mosquitoes out. Check the Extension Office for more information or find this on the web at <http://rainwaterharvesting.tamu.edu/>.

Shop around

It you are adding new turf or replacing old turf, consider shopping for grass that is drought-tolerant. Seashore Paspalum is a native grass that is both salt- and drought-tolerant. You may choose buffalo grass if you have clay soil that is not salty, and if you don't mind a casual look and hate to mow. Common Bermuda requires more maintenance than buffalo grass, but it is almost as drought-tolerant. In the days before automatic sprinklers, Texas homeowners let their Bermuda lawns go completely dormant in hot, dry weather, because they knew the grass would be green again after one good rain. Zoysia tolerates some shade and requires less water than St. Augustine. If you love the look of St. Augustine, Floratam is the variety most often recommended for our area.

Conserve water by design

When you plan your landscape, group plants by their water needs. Those needing the most water should be closest to the house where they will be sheltered from drying winds, and where they will be easy to water.

Maintenance

Your landscape should be one that can be maintained without putting undue stress on our waterways and landfills—or on you!

Mulch, mulch, mulch

A 4" layer of mulch can make the difference between gardening success and failure. Mulch is crucial for cooling the soil and retaining moisture in the hot summer months. A thick layer of mulch will prevent the germination of annual weeds.

Buy it cheap

Aransas County residents can purchase very inexpensive, double-cut mulch in bulk from the Transfer Station (872 Airport Rd., Rockport). Conversely, for a small fee, the Transfer Station accepts clean yard waste that will be recycled into compost. Also, Ingleside makes mulch available free to Ingleside residents.

Apply Transfer Station mulch with ammonium sulfate at a rate of 1 lb. per 100 sq. ft. Half of the ammonium sulfate should go under the mulch and half on top. Water well. Twice a year, in spring and fall, work the old mulch layer into the soil before applying more mulch.

Don't bag leaves

Live oak leaves that have been run over with a mulching mower make a great spring mulch. Never send bagged leaves to the landfill.

Compost is gardeners' gold

Compost acts as fertilizer, mulch and soil conditioner all in one. It helps sandy soil retain water, loosens clay soil so water can percolate, and provides nutrients and air needed for healthy roots. For a complete compost recipe and all the help you need to make your own, visit the Extension office.

If you don't save grass clippings for compost, leave them on the lawn. When you mow, use a mulching mower and remove only the top third of the grass blade. The little bits of grass will decompose quickly, providing free fertilizer for your lawn. A hundred pounds of grass clippings will return 3-4 pounds of nitrogen to the soil every year. Grass clippings should never be sent to the landfill with other trash, nor should they be blown into the storm drains.

Water wisely

Most homeowners water lawns and flower beds too much and too often. Water only when the landscape needs it, not on a time schedule. When you walk across the grass and your footprints remain, it's time to water. Grass should be watered very early in the morning.

If you have a sprinkler system, find out how long it must run to wet the soil to a depth of 6 inches. That is the equivalent of an inch of rain, which your yard needs about once a week. Set tuna cans in various spots in the yard and run the sprinkler for 30 minutes. Measure the water in each can and calculate the average depth of water in all the cans. Then use a spade to see how far down the moisture goes. If the soil is wet three inches down after 30 minutes of watering, you know the system must run for an hour to wet the soil to a depth of 6 inches. On sandy soil, be careful not to water so much that you send the water and nutrients past the root zone. Do not water from 10 a.m.—6 p.m.

Set your sprinkler to deliver large drops of water rather than fine mist. If you will be away from home and must put your sprinkler on a timer, set it to run once a week. Get a rain sensor for your system so it will not run in the rain.

Go easy on the fertilizer

Use the results of your soil test to determine what nutrients to add to your lawn. Less nitrogen fertilizer is appropriate for low-maintenance lawns and for those in environmentally sensitive sites. Just two applications of slow-release nitrogen fertilizer per year, one in spring and one in fall, are sufficient. At most, apply 1 lb. of nitrogen per 1000 sq. ft. For a complete discussion of what to use and when to use it, get "Lawn Fertilization for Texas Warm-Season Grasses" at the Extension office. We DO NOT recommend products that kill weeds and fertilize grass in one step, because such products can kill trees and shrubs.

To prune or not to prune

Study your tree carefully before you prune it. Be sure you will like the view once offending branches are removed. Prune in the winter months, and use the three-cut pruning method to remove large branches. Use pruning paint on oak trees. A small tree planted in the landscape will grow better and more quickly than a large transplant. Do not top trees, including crape myrtles. Prune carefully to direct growth when the tree is young. For three-cut pruning, see <http://texastreeplanting.tamu.edu/prunelargetree limb.html>.

Be kind to your palm trees

Ordinary lawn fertilizer provides too much nitrogen for palm trees and none of the trace elements that palms require. Over-pruning deprives palms of the nutrients they need and can speed their demise. Choose your palm trees from those we include in this book. For detailed information on palm nutrition, see <http://www.floridaplants.com/horticulture/palm.html>. Another useful website is www.plantapalm.com.

Know your insects

That scary-looking creature on the passion vine will grow up to be a lovely Gulf Fritillary butterfly, and the multi-colored, striped caterpillar gorging himself on your parsley or dill will be a Swallowtail. Most insects are not harmful. Learn to recognize and encourage beneficial insects in your garden. They keep harmful pests in check at no cost to you. Visit the Extension office for materials on problem insects and the least-polluting ways to control them. Above all, don't treat the problem until you know what the problem is!

Dispose of garden chemicals properly

If you choose your landscape plants from those in this guide, you will need to use less fertilizer, herbicide and pesticide in your garden, but the odds are you will need some of these. Store them safely and do not send them to the landfill with other trash. Your city or county will have one or two hazardous waste disposal days each year. Contact your local government for those dates.

Plant Selection

Finally, choose your plants. The plants included in this guide were chosen because they are as tough as they are beautiful, requiring much less water and maintenance than others you might choose. Many are native to our area, and many will attract the birds and butterflies that make living here such a pleasure.

Your plants need space

Allow for the mature height and width of plants when you install them in your landscape. Properly placed plants will look meager at first, but they will grow quickly. Plants put too close to your house or to each other will be susceptible to disease. Consider mature height of trees when planting around power lines.

Create the perfect environment

Try containers to grow old favorites that are not well adapted to the Coastal Bend or water-loving tropicals that need shelter. Use a high-quality potting mix (not potting soil) and buy a pot large enough to hold the plant for several growing seasons. Clay pots keep roots cool, but dry out quickly. Plastic pots will hold moisture longer.

Only the strong survive

Look for salt tolerant plants if you are gardening next to salt water. The Extension office has comprehensive lists of plants that will grow successfully in salty soil and within range of salt spray and salt water.

Encourage visitors

Our little corner of the Coastal Bend is world-renowned for the wildlife that spend winters here or rest here mid-migration. With the right plants for food and cover, even the smallest back yard can be a haven for birds and butterflies. Look for the bird, hummingbird and butterfly icons next to plant pictures in this booklet and visit the Extension office for more suggestions.