

Meetings and Announcements

Annual Winter Pruning Demonstrations

We plan to hold our annual winter pruning demonstrations for deciduous fruit trees and grapes Thursday and Friday, January 18 and 19, 2024. The location, as usual, is the UC Cooperative Extension office orchard, 1031 S. Mt. Vernon Ave. Time: noon to 1:30 pm each day. Rain or shine. No charge and no pre-registration. Come one, come all.

Master Gardener Program

UC Cooperative Extension in Kern County has received funding for a Master Gardener (MG) coordinator. The funding cycle began Oct. 1, and the wheels are turning to hire a coordinator. The timeline suggests we would begin the MG program next fall. The MG program offers classroom instruction in horticulture with a required volunteer-hour component. We have not had an MG program in Kern Co. since ca. 1993, when we moved to an educational outreach in horticulture without the volunteer component. I don't have plans for a horticulture class this spring and likely not until the MG program begins.

Next Horticultural Tour

Yes, we are working on an itinerary to northern Spain and Portugal in early autumn, 2024. The likely start date would be either September 8 or 15, depending on hotel availability and other logistics. We had a very good horticulture tour visit to Madrid and southern Spain a few years ago, so this itinerary would take us to areas we have not previously visited on a horticulture tour.

"The falling leaves..."

...drift by the window,
 The autumn leaves,
 of red and gold."

The above is the first stanza of the song "Autumn Leaves," written by Nat King Cole. In a minor key, which gives it a wistful and reflective feeling, I like the version sung by Eva Cassidy.

But what to do with those leaves? They make excellent mulch material for roses and other shrubs, and a valuable source of organic matter for our soils, which are generally low. Autumn leaves can also be tilled into soil of a vegetable garden to improve soil tilth.

Unfortunately, many of those autumn leaves end up in greenwaste instead of being a benefit to a local landscape. I am reminded of a story, a hypothetical conversation in heaven between St. Peter and St. Francis, a story that I offer below. I offer this dialogue to

make a point that several of our familiar and current landscape practices are at odds, at least to an extent, with the natural ecosystem. (If you have been in one of our horticulture classes, you may have already encountered this dialogue.)

There are several versions of this story. I don't know the original author and I have modified the dialogue, so I offer what I have without further attribution.

ST. PETER:

Frank, you know all about gardens and nature. What in the world is going on down there on the planet? What happened to the dandelions, violets, milkweeds and stuff started eons ago? It was a perfect no-maintenance garden plan. Those plants grow in any type of soil, withstand drought and multiply with abandon. The nectar from the long-lasting blossoms attracts butterflies, honeybees and flocks of songbirds. I expected to see a vast garden of colors by now. But, all I see are these green rectangles.

St. FRANCIS:

It's the tribes that settled there--the Suburbanites. They started calling our flowers "weeds" and went to great lengths to kill them and replace them with grass.

ST. PETER:

Grass? But, it's so boring. It's not colorful. It doesn't attract butterflies, birds and bees, only grubs and sod worms. It's sensitive to temperatures. Do these Suburbanites really want all that grass growing there?

ST. FRANCIS:

Apparently so. They go to great pains to grow it and keep it green. They begin each spring by fertilizing grass and poisoning any other plant that crops up in the lawn.

ST. PETER:

The spring rains and warm weather probably make grass grow really fast. That must make the Suburbanites happy.

ST. FRANCIS:

Apparently not! As soon as it grows a little, they cut it--sometimes twice a week.

ST. PETER:

They cut it? Do they then bale it like hay? Do they use it for animal feed?

ST. FRANCIS:

Not exactly. Most of them rake it up and put it in bags.

ST. PETER:

They bag it? Why? Is it a cash crop? Do they sell it?

ST. FRANCIS:

No, sir, just the opposite. They pay to throw it away.

ST. PETER:

Now, let me get this straight. They fertilize grass so it will grow. And, when it does grow, they cut it off and pay to throw it away?

ST. FRANCIS:

Yes, sir.

ST. PETER:

These Suburbanites must be relieved in the summer when we cut back on the rain and turn up the heat. That surely slows the growth and saves them a lot of work.

ST. FRANCIS:

You aren't going to believe this. When the grass stops growing so fast, they use the expensive irrigation systems they've installed and pay more money to water it, so they can continue to mow it and pay to get rid of it.

ST. PETER:

What nonsense. At least they kept some of the trees. That was a sheer stroke of genius by the Creator. The trees grow leaves in the spring to provide beauty and shade in the summer. In the autumn, they provide a further benefit of beauty and fall to the ground to form a natural blanket to keep moisture in the soil and protect the trees and bushes. It's a natural cycle of life.

ST. FRANCIS:

You better sit down. The Suburbanites have drawn a new circle. As soon as the leaves fall, they rake them into great piles and pay to have them hauled away.

ST. PETER:

No! What do they do to protect the shrub and tree roots in the winter to keep the soil moist and loose?

ST. FRANCIS:

After throwing away the leaves, they go out and buy something they call mulch. They haul it home and spread it around in place of the leaves.

ST. PETER:

And where do they get this mulch?

ST. FRANCIS:

They cut down trees and grind them up to make the mulch.

ST. PETER:

Enough! I don't want to think about this anymore. St. Catherine, you're in charge of the arts. What movie have you scheduled for us tonight?

ST. CATHERINE:

'Dumb and Dumber.' It's a story about....

ST. PETER:

Never mind, I think I just heard the whole story from St. Francis.

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