

Regional Voices

The Regional Voices column offers leaders from throughout the North Central Texas region an opportunity to share their views on environment and development-related topics of interest to North Texans. To be considered as a future Regional Voices author, please e-mail InSight@nctcog.org and use the subject line "Regional Voices".

Using Native and Adapted Plants in North Texas

By Jerry Parr, Parker County Master Gardener Association

As Spring approaches, I'm sure that many of you—and many homeowners across North Texas—are facing the same thoughts that I am as you begin to think about making landscaping choices for your yard this year.

Which plants would you rather have in your landscape? Those that thrive with minimal care or those that barely survive despite your valiant efforts?



Most people moving into Parker County from other parts of the country bring with them memories of favorite plants from their previous gardens. Their natural impulse is to plant the same or similar types of species here. Many times, this not only requires a lot of hard work and money, but may still result in disappointment.

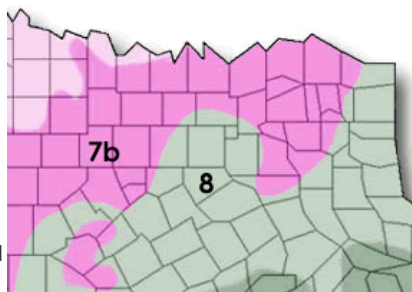
The soils in Parker County (and other North Texas counties)—and our extreme Texas weather—can be inhospitable for many types of plants that thrive in other areas. For best results, we recommend that you use plants that are native to our area, or have been proven to be adaptable to the soils and climate of your part of the region. These plants will thrive with a reasonable amount of care, and will survive our worst conditions even with minimal attention.

Planting native and adapted doesn't mean that your landscape will consist of nothing but bull nettle and prickly pear! There is an amazing variety of native and adapted plants to suit most any landscape style. Some of my favorites for Parker County are *Salvia Greggii* (also called Autumn Sage) for its incredible bloom time from March through November; Blue Mist Flower, a magnet for Monarch butterflies; and Texas Star Hibiscus. These plants will also grow well in counties to our east. For a searchable database of these and other beautiful native and adapted plants—from trees, to shrubs, to perennials, to grasses—visit www.txsmartscape.com.



Parker County—and much of our region—is located in Hardiness Zone 7b. Tarrant and Dallas Counties are in Zone 8. The zones are ranked with the lower numbers for colder areas and higher numbers for warmer. At the nursery, always read the plant tag to determine the plant's hardiness. The zone number shown on the tag is the coldest zone that it will tolerate. When considering native plants, remember that Texas is a large state covering four hardiness zones. Just because a plant is native to Texas does not automatically mean it can grow in our area.

Most of Parker County is situated in what is called the Western Cross Timbers area, a wooded region extending in a generally southward direction through Montague, Wise, Jack, Parker, Hood, Erath, and Comanche counties. The region is generally considered to have loamy to clayey soils that are predominantly alkaline (high pH). If you compare this region to East Texas and much of the southern United States from Georgia to Texas, you will see that Parker County has much less rainfall, the soils have less organic matter, and most importantly, the soil is not acidic. This means that many acid-loving



plants like azaleas, dogwood, camellias, and pine trees will not do well here even though those plants thrive about 90 miles to the east.

Native plants have been around for many thousands of years, acclimatizing themselves to their habitats. Native plant gardening means using the plants that are best suited to the conditions where you live. Native plants are remarkably self-sufficient; after all, they've been taking care of themselves for thousands of years. With native plants, your property will have a true "sense of place"—something that is missing from most of our homogenized, look-alike landscapes.

If you need more specific information about choosing plants that will thrive in your area, your local Master Gardeners are a terrific resource. The Texas Master Gardener Program is an educational activity offered by Agrilife Extension in affiliation with Texas A & M University designed to increase the availability of horticultural information and improve the quality of landscaping in Texas. To contact the Master Gardeners in your county, visit <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/mastergd/county.html>.



The Parker County Master Gardener Association (PCMGA) provides help to the people of Parker County by answering the gardening phone line in the Extension Office, working in several community gardens and providing seminars on horticultural related topics. You can contact the PCMGA at (817) 598-6168 or www.pcmga-texas.org.

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