

# Firebush Stunning For All Gardens

BY NORMAN WINTER

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Watching hummingbirds on a firebush this weekend reminded me of what an incredible plant we all have for our garden. I was speaking at the San Antonio Botanical Garden as part of their Amazing Butterflies Exhibit debut. A walk around the gardens was an absolute thrill.

The firebush was one of the first Texas Superstars close to 20 years ago. Now decades later it is finally gaining the recognition it deserves. The firebush, is also known as hummingbird bush and scarlet bush, and botanically speaking is *Hamelia patens*.



Technically, it is a zone 9 to 10 plant, but I have seen it return many years in zone 8. But don't let those zones throw you. It is a plant to be enjoyed throughout the country. Since it blooms from June through November or the first freeze, it

The firebush produces scarlet tubular flowers relished by hummingbirds and many butterflies.

is most worthy as an annual purchase and is a virtual hummingbird magnet. It also receives a fair share of butterflies.

The firebush is an evergreen shrub or small tree in many areas of tropical and subtropical America. It can be seen growing prolifically near magnificent stone pyramids in Veracruz and the Yucatan. In the San Antonio area it grows well over 4 feet; it will most likely reach 24 to 36 inches in height in your garden.

After the past two summers, many gardeners are looking for those plants that are as tough-as-nails when it comes to heat and droughty conditions. I am happy to say the firebush fits the bill. It is very heat and drought tolerant once established, and will grow in almost any soil that is well-drained.

The clean, attractive foliage of the firebush



The firebush was partnered with the blue flowered *Salvia Indigo Spires* at the San Antonio Botanical Garden.

serves as the perfect complement to its bright scarlet, tubular flowers with deeper red throats. The flowers are produced continuously and never require deadheading. Hummingbirds and butterflies love the flowers, and birds eat any fruit that is formed. If this isn't enough to warrant buying the firebush, consider also that the foliage turns red in the fall.

Next spring, or now if you live in a warmer region, consider planting at least three for a nice show. Space plants 2 to 3 feet apart in fertile, well-drained soil in the full, scorching sun. Apply a good layer of mulch after planting. Feed every four to six weeks while growing with a slow-released, balanced fertilizer with minor nutrients. Occasionally prune lightly during the long growing season to produce a bushier plant. In the winter, an added layer of mulch just may help you have a spring return.

The stunning display at the San Antonio

Botanical Garden and them combined with the Indigo Spires blue salvia. This combination is just about as hardy and easy to grow as anyone could want.

Try some in containers for the porch, patio, deck or pool. Fill your container with a loose, open potting mix, and then add time-released fertilizer. Don't skimp on the soil — get the best. Containerized plants can be over-wintered near a bright window inside the home and will be even larger next summer.

When you buy a firebush you will get an outstanding plant that can take the intense summer sun, drought and humidity of a long torrid summer.

*Norman Winter is executive director of The National Butterfly Center in Mission, Texas, and author of "Tough-as-Nails Flowers for the South" and "Captivating Combinations: Color and Style in the Garden." Contact him at: winter@naba.org.*

## WEED PATCH

# Fall Is A Wonderful Time Of The Year

BY LINDA WUEBBEN  
P&D Correspondent



Wuebben

Fall is a wonderful time of the year: cool nights, warm days. We in the farming arena are patiently watching as our crop loses its green color and turns brown and dry. Harvest is almost here; another year of farming under our belts.

I would say there is a buzz in the air in anticipation of that combine rolling across acres and acres of cropland ... but there's not. I am thankful it's pretty quiet here right now.

For the month of August, Bob and I woke up every morning to this "thunk" on our basement window underneath our bedroom. When I first heard it, I knew it had to be a really big bug and then I wondered if a calf was out and rubbing on something outside our house. I would look out the windows and never see anything.

Then, after hearing it numerous times and wondering what it was, I was actually in the basement one day when I heard the noise. I quickly dropped what I was looking for in the freezer and headed to the bedroom.

I stood in awe as I watched a red cardinal zoom into the window, "thunk." Yes, "thunk" is the noise the bird made when he hit, beak first, the window. Then he kind of slid slowly down the pane until he hit the ground. Wobbling a bit like he was punch-drunk, he backed from the window a few steps, and took flight to land on the sidewalk a couple feet away.

Then to my amazement, he squawked quite loudly and headed for the window again. "Thunk!" Again and again and again and again. Wasn't he getting a headache?

So after I identified his squawk, I realized he had been doing this for a couple days. The bird was quick and it was difficult to see him from our upstairs windows. The basement window gave the best vantage point. Bob and our grandsons were down there one day and laughed their heads off at the bird's frantic antics.

Obviously, from the tone of his squawk, he was upset with someone or something. And that bird he was seeing in the window, his reflection, was probably the source of his turmoil. Every morning, with the sun barely up, we would wake up to his valiant war cry and, yep, you got it, "thunk!" Again and again all morning long.

We don't hear the "thunk" anymore now so either he gave up or he's dead. I miss the morning birdsong we had all summer long but I don't miss the "thunk."

Watching wildlife is truly one of the priceless perks we enjoy with country living. Bob and I are also enjoying our pet squirrel right now. Early in the morning, he is dashing from one side of our driveway out of a grove to a cornfield on the other side. Often Bob has to wait for him to cross, and he has noticed the squirrel is patiently cleaning all the kernels off an ear of corn on just one stalk.

Evidently the squirrel has claimed that one ear as his own. First, he started on the bottom of the ear, wrestling each kernel from its cob. The ear is almost kernel-less now, and I wonder, if we walked in the grove, would we find his hidey-hole? Would the corn be spilling out? Will he need to gather more? When will enough be enough? Will he hit another stalk before the combine takes his winter snack away?

Well, I didn't get enough this year — tomatoes that is. I knew when the temperature was high in July and no rain cooled the heat wave, we would regret it. I have plenty of plants and they are alive. In fact, some of the stems are six feet high. But tomatoes just don't set on very well with high temperatures.

So I canned my 50 quarts of juice first and then passed the rest of the crop out sparingly to my three daughters. Hopefully this will push some of them to invest in more of a garden so Mom can cut a few feet off her garden.

Yeah, like that's going to happen. Bob just looks at me and smiles.

# Backyard Birding Fun For The Whole Family



Birdbaths are a great addition to the backyard wildlife habitat.

BY NORMAN WINTER

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If there is one thing I have come to learn over the last few months is that birds make the landscape! The National Butterfly Center has every native plant imaginable for butterflies but the garden would not be as enjoyable without the host of birds. The enthusiasts with safari shirts, Tilley hats and the high-end cameras give further testimony to their importance.

But what about your home — can you duplicate it without looking like a wildlife refuge? The answer is an unequivocal yes. Birdbaths and feeders are readily available at all garden centers and can put you on the road to identifying birds you never knew were around. Attracting an assortment of colorful birds to your landscape is a project the whole family can enjoy.

Bird feeders can be great educa-

tional projects for children. They open a whole new world by giving children the responsibility for choosing the location and maintaining a feeder. Armed with a bird guide or encyclopedia, your child will be identifying the feasting birds in your yard in no time. Even the most advanced birder comes to our center armed with a guide book or two.

Birds need more than just food. Birdbaths will supply water for drinking and bathing. They not only are functional but can become an attractive focal point in the landscape. Just today I watched seven Greater Kiskadees all gathered around a bird bath. Though you might not have them in your region you are sure to have some every bit as enjoyable to watch. But you have to provide the water.

Here at the National Butterfly Center we don't provide birdhouses, but do have great nesting opportunities in native trees and shrubs. At your home you can do both, plant trees and include birdhouses like fine yard art. These have become the rage nationally, from the very simple single-story bungalows, to decorative gourds, to those that look like churches, schools and even antebellum homes. I have seen some birdhouses that almost make me wish I could live there. I have also seen birdhouses that cost more than some cars I have owned.

While bird feeders, houses and baths are fun for the family, you'll want to incorporate native plants in the landscape with berries or fruit that birds consider a delicacy. In my area of Deep South Texas plants like the fiddlewood with bright orange berries, the anacua with its yellow fruit, and the Barbados cherry with its deep cranberry colored fruit are bird favorites.



This Greater Kiskadee is ready for a little sunrise breakfast of berries at the top of this large fiddlewood.

In your area the favorites may be the steel blue berries of the wax myrtle, the bright red fruit of the dogwood or one of a dozen hollies. It is pretty neat to have good looking trees and shrubs that also serve as food and shelter for birds.

Most parts of the country have native sumac, many of these are champions when it comes to feeding birds. The stag horn sumac is one such prize, feeding a documented 94

species of birds.

As fall approaches, we can rest assured it is one of the best times for planting trees and shrubs. We can select those that are native and produce an abundance of fruit or berries for the urban wildlife. Add birdhouses, feeders and baths, and you have created your own backyard wildlife habitat for you and the birds.

# Fall Is Time To Aerate, Fertilize And Seed

BY KATHY VAN MULLEKOM

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If your lawn is ragged and tired looking from the hot, dry summer, fall is the time to get it back into good shape.

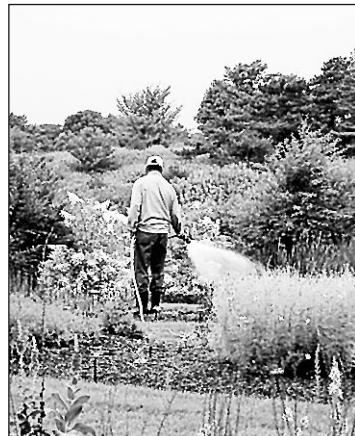
Now through Thanksgiving is the season to aerate, seed and fertilize your cool-season fescue grass so roots grow deep and healthy while temperatures are moderate. Spring is the wrong time for major lawn care because your shallow-rooted new grass will struggle when summer's scorching temperatures arrive.

Tired from mowing grass all summer?

Think of fall lawn care as the efficient way to get your recommended 10,000 daily steps done toward a healthy heart while beautifying your property at the same time.

To aerate, use a core-type aerator that removes 2- to 3-inch plugs of soil. This allows air and water to penetrate the soil, especially if it's compacted or clay heavy. Don't worry about the plugs lying on top of the lawn because rain will break them down.

For organic fertilizer, apply a 1/2 to 1-inch layer of aged com-



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LazyMan's Soil Doctor is a one-step lawn and garden program applied with a hose-end sprayer.

post before or after you aerate. The healthier your soil, the healthier your grass. Good soil is filled with microorganisms, worms and other beneficial life forms, so resist the urge to use lawn chemicals that will ruin this natural balance.

Seed after you've put down the compost and aerated. Keep the seed moist until it germinates and water when there is no rainfall. Try to wait 30 days before mowing new grass.

Looking for the lazy way out?

The LazyMan Soil Doctor program does most of your fall lawn care in one easy step. All you need is a hose-end sprayer to apply the all-natural product that includes:

Polymers that penetrate hard soil and alternately attract or repel water molecules, opening pathways to admit free passage of moisture and nutrients.

Microbes that feed on the dead plant tissue of the thatch layer at the soil surface, thereby reducing that problem buildup. Thatching, or removing that buildup, is not necessary if you use a mulching mower and cut often so the grass clippings are

small and can readily decompose to return nutrients and moisture back into your soil.

Humic acids that stimulate plants and soil microbes, and mycorrhizae that attach to roots and help plants absorb more water and nutrients while in turn feeding themselves on plant sap.

To learn more about lawn care the LazyMan way, visit [www.outsidepride.com](http://www.outsidepride.com).

*Kathy Van Mullekom is home and gardening columnist and writer of the weekly "Diggin' In" column at the Daily Press in Newport News, Va. Follow her blog at [roomandyard.com/diggin](http://roomandyard.com/diggin); email: [kvanmullekom@dailypress.com](mailto:kvanmullekom@dailypress.com).*

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