Raining Roses

Despite her surname, Nell Rains knows a thing or two about drought. The third-generation farmer and longtime Capital Farm Credit customer owns farmland in Swisher and Hale counties in the Texas Panhandle, and her son and husband farm an additional 3,000 acres. She has seen her share of bone-dry weather, dust storms, blazing heat, freezing cold and gale-force winds. Now retired from active farming, she nevertheless maintains her passion for growing things.

"When my first husband passed away, I found solace in the soil — it helped me to mend," Rains says. "I still find that my real interest is digging in the dirt."

A certified Texas Master Gardener, Rains is an Earth-Kind Landscape Team member. Earth-Kind is a Texas A&M University program that uses research-proven landscaping and gardening techniques that preserve and protect the environment.

Rains specializes in Earth-Kind roses, cultivars that have been awarded a special designation from the Texas AgriLife Extension Service after having demonstrated superior pest tolerance and outstanding landscape performance, during years of research and field trials. She tests roses for the program and has assisted the creator, Dr. Steve George, with various trials. She is currently involved with a research project for the University of Wisconsin studying the effects of heat, wind and black spot on northern roses.

Earlier this year, Rains helped install a planting of all 23 Earth-Kind rose varieties at the Lubbock Arboretum as part of its 50th anniversary celebration — the farthest west planting of the cultivars to date. The roses are doing well, despite the unprecedented drought conditions. "The Texas Panhandle is a harsh environment," says Rains. "Plants — as well as folks — have to be tough to survive here.

"I apply Earth-Kind Landscape management techniques to every area of my landscape," she continues. "Everything gets compost and proper mulch. I planted soil conservation trees 30 years ago by this method, and they have survived the drought unscathed. My lawn areas consist of buffalo grass, Bermuda and bluegrass/fescue mix in shade areas. I grow everything from peonies to Berlandiera [a wildflower]; drought-tolerant sages to crape myrtles."

Courtesy of Nell Rains

Nell Rains

Rains' property is proof positive that it is possible to maintain a beautiful landscape even under the toughest of conditions. She readily shares some secrets of her success:

- Select plants that will grow in your area.
- Choose the best planting site. Considerations are sun exposure and air circulation.
- Have your soil tested and make improvements based upon the recommendations from the analysis. Add organic matter to the soil to improve its structure, improve drainage and avoid root rot.
- Improve what you have. Don't bring in soil that might contain unknown pesticides and hidden weed problems.
- If your soil quality is poor, try raised beds.
- Mulch, mulch, mulch! Top-dress all exposed soil with 4 inches of organic mulch, which adds nutrients to the soil, helps the soil retain moisture and controls annual weeds as it decomposes. Use gravel mulch around xeric plants such as cactus and lavender.
- In the landscape, group together plants that have similar requirements.
- Water on an as-needed basis. Stick a finger deep into the soil to see when to water. Water deeply, but avoid watering at night, which increases fungal diseases. Don't forget winter watering.
- In all extremes, monitor closely. Heat and wind can quickly affect plants.

RESOURCES

For information on fire-wise landscaping, visit the National Fire Protection Association website, www.firewise.org, or see the Texas Forest Service's publication on the topic, available online at bit.ly/TexasFirewiseLandscape. Your local Extension office can provide information on suitable plants.

The Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center lists native species by state on its Native Plant Information Network at www.wildflower.org/collections.

Alabama • Alabama Cooperative Extension System, Alabama A&M University and Auburn University together produced a publication, Alabama Smart Yards, which can be found at www.aces.edu/pubs.

Louisiana • The LSU AgCenter Extension Service has developed the Louisiana Yards & Neighborhoods (LYN) Program, focusing on landscapes that minimize environmental damage, conserve water, reduce storm runoff and enhance desirable wildlife habitats. The LYN handbook can be found at http://lsuagcenter.com/en/lawn_garden.

Mississippi • Mississippi State University offers all sorts of information about creating sustainable landscapes and gardens. Visit http://msucares.com/lawn/landscape/sustainable/index.html.

New Mexico • The Native Plant Society of New Mexico provides a list of plants and information about sustainable landscapes for New Mexico at http://npsnm.unm.edu/native_plant.html.

Texas • The Texas AgriLife Extension Service offers landscaping information at http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu. The Earth-Kind section is especially pertinent.