



WINTER PLANT PREPARATION

by Joe Herring

Winter weather in the Texas Hill Country has become even more unpredictable in the past few years, with fewer really cold days.



A century ago it was definitely colder here in the winter, given the number of photographs of snow found in my collection of historic photos of the Texas Hill Country.

Above is a photo taken around 1917 of Helena Brown, the granddaughter of the founder of Kerrville. The snow was thick that day.

We haven't had weather like that since 1984. Our weather's different, now.

Many fall mornings will find a thick fog tracing the course of the rivers and creeks, and as I drive to work around sunrise during the late autumn and early winter I often see fog in the valley below. Later in the morning, the sun will rise, and the day will grow warm, with ghosts of mist rose from parking lots and lawns, rising to a brilliantly clear sky. It was quite beautiful.

This lull between the coming cold weather of January and the remaining cold snaps of autumn brings to mind the chores I still have to do in my garden as I get ready for the coming season.

If anticipation is truly the best spice, I suppose these waiting days before planting time are some of the most flavorful of the year.

I still have most of the physical work ahead of me to get my small garden bed ready for the upcoming season. I need to till the ground and sow winter rye, a gardening trick I play each year. The rye is a

cold weather plant and fades quickly when the weather warms, and so I plant it to provide a nice mulch for the garden, and also to crowd out some of the weeds anxious to spring up and choke my favored plants.

The rye, as it dies, leaves a thick carpet that helps conserve water and holds the soil in place.

When it comes time to plant, I cut a dinner plate sized hole in the rye turf and put in either the seeds or seedling, leaving the rye standing around the plant. The rye isn't too pretty after it dies, I'll admit, but it does its job nicely when the sun blares down in July and August.

The part of the garden work I haven't done yet is the planning – the fun part, really. This time of year, when the skies start to shiver in the fading sun, there are few simple joys more precious than a seed catalog, a nice chair, a sunny window, and time to read.

I used read through the few catalogs that came to my mailbox with great interest, like a hungry man reading a large menu at a roadside diner, and while my imagination lingered on exotic plants (tennis ball lettuce, for instance), I always returned to the plants I've known for many years, the ones that are reliable.

The trouble is there are few printed seed catalogs anymore. Everything has either gone online, or, as in the case of my favorite seed company, gone out of business.

Thankfully I have found a reliable advisor in Trena Cullins at the Plant Haus here in Kerrville. She's helped me for years, guiding me as I pick out plants, and answering my many questions.

Until next time, all the best.