



## GREEN HOME AND GARDEN TIP #6

BY GREEN HOME AND GARDEN COMMITTEE,  
Texas Master Naturalist

As the weather turns cooler, (don't laugh, it will) Houstonians will once again start thinking enviously about the brilliant show of fall color farther north and wonder why we can't have something similar here. We could, if we used more Texas natives in our yards. But we Gulf coasters want things both ways: We want fall color and we also want some green in our yards all year around. Over the decades, we've planted lots of live oaks, Magnolias, Chinese ligustrum, pittisporum, azaleas and red-tip photinias, which keep things looking dependably green, though a little on the dull side of verdant. But most of these plants are native to other parts of the world, and to quote Lady Bird, "Shouldn't Texas look like Texas?"

The truth is this: Texas, and specifically the Houston area, has many beautiful native species that display great fall color and add diversity and interest to the home landscape year round. The procession of the seasons here could look like this: fresh young leaves and flowers sprout in the spring, followed by the richer color that occurs in the deep part of summer, then autumn arrives with beautiful yellows, oranges and reds, and then winter comes with the beautiful architecture of bare branches against the sky.

A wider color-range isn't the only benefit of using Texas natives. They also encourage birds, butterflies and other native wildlife to spend time in your home garden. Native birds love the Red Oaks, Red Maples, American Beautyberries, the Strawberry bush, oak-leaved Hydrangea, possum haw holly, native viburnums, native sumacs (not the poisonous type) and the Virginia creeper vine. Another benefit: planting a variety of natives will help replace the native plants threatened every day by rapid urban development.

We've made some big mistakes in the past in search for fall color. For decades, Houstonians planted the Chinese Tallow tree for its beautiful red-gold autumn display, and the species is now prevalent in the state. But Tallow has proved to be a highly-destructive monster: invasive and nearly-impossible to kill. It's such a pest that it's now banned from commercial sale. It has virtually no natural predators; its deep shade kills other species, and its leaf-fall taints the soil for natives. Its leaves, bark, and fruit are toxic to livestock, humans, and most animals. That's too big a price to pay for fall color. Pull up any saplings you find in your yard, and if you can afford to, cut down all your mature Chinese Tallow trees and treat the stumps with an approved herbicide – or the tree will sprout again.

Plant smart: plant natives.

For more information on native plants, see: [www.npsot.org/Houston/](http://www.npsot.org/Houston/)

**The Texas Master Naturalists is a group of informed volunteers who are interested in learning about and educating others about the area of Texas where we live and with preserving our natural heritage. We are co-sponsored by the Texas Cooperative Extension Service and Texas Parks and Wildlife. For more information about our group, log on to [gcmn.tamu.edu](http://gcmn.tamu.edu) or [www.coastalprairie.org](http://www.coastalprairie.org).**

**The Green Home and Garden Workshop is an ongoing project co-sponsored by the Gulf Coast chapter and the Coastal Prairie chapter of Texas Master Naturalists. Our mission is to interest and inform people about safe and eco-friendly ways to garden and maintain their homes. We have a workshop event once a year. The next workshop will be held on February 16, 2008.**