

# HOME/GARDEN

SPRING 2019

## WRITING A NEW CHAPTER

*One year after the tornado, words of gratitude fill a Jacksonville home. Page 2*



Stephen Gross/The Anniston Star

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# WRITING A NEW CHAPTER

*One year after the tornado, words of gratitude fill a Jacksonville home*

**BY LISA DAVIS**  
ldavis@annistonstar.com

It was a Monday afternoon. Anja McCastle was putting the finishing touches on a yearlong remodel of her Jacksonville home. She had done much of the work herself.

After she painted the last baseboard, she took a photo and sent it to her husband, who was out of town on business. "I'm finally done, babe!" she said.

That was Monday, March 19, 2018. Hours later, a tornado tore through the neighborhood.

"My house was destroyed," McCastle said. "The tornado just ripped it apart."

The tornado's 140-mph winds tore off the roof, lifted up the house and pushed it off the foundation.

McCastle and her cat, Munchkin, had taken shelter with the neighbors across the street. "I wouldn't be here without them," she said.

The next day, walking through the remains of her house, she noticed shards of broken glass and jagged pieces of wood embedded in the walls of the interior hallway — where she would have taken shelter if she hadn't gone to the neighbors' house.

One year after the tornado, McCastle and her husband have moved back into their home. The rooms are now light, airy

and welcoming, decorated in farmhouse style in shades of gray.

McCastle has filled the house with words. There are quotes on the walls, words on the throw pillows, on the mugs in the kitchen.

*Home*  
*Welcome*  
*Love*  
*Thankful*  
*This is our happily ever after*  
*Eat cake for breakfast*

"I'm all about quotes and sayings. I feel like it brings out who I am," McCastle said. "You decorate and it brings out you."

Her favorite among the many words in the house is a plaque reading:

"Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass ... it's about learning to dance in the rain."

Anja and Steven McCastle have been married 25 years. Steven is from Arkansas, Anja is from Germany. Steven is former military — they met when he was stationed in Germany — and he now works for the Anniston Army Depot. Anja works for Academy Sports in Gadsden.

They have a son who is a chef in Germany. There's a new granddaughter in Germany, too.

The family moved to Alabama 13 years



Stephen Gross/The Anniston Star

Anja McCastle rode out the tornado with her cat, Munchkin. 'In a closet with a mattress thrown on top of us, he just laid his head on my shoulder and held on tight.'

Please see **NEW** | Page 5

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In the den, the only thing that kept the ceiling from collapsing during the tornado was a *wohnzimmerschrank*, a heavy wooden cabinet that Anja McCastle had brought from Germany.

Stephen Gross/The Anniston Star



Stephen Gross/The Anniston Star

Anja McCastle put her DIY skills to work constructing a wood feature wall near the front door.

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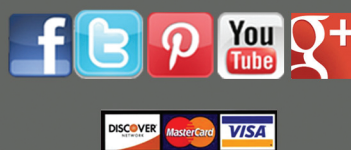
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Stephen Gross/The Anniston Star

The kitchen cabinets were supposed to be a lighter grey. “The contractor called and said, ‘I think we made a mistake,’” but Anja McCastle liked the new color.

NEW

Continued from Page 2

ago, and have lived in the Jacksonville house for 10 years.

McCastle has reinvented the house many times over. “I used to paint my house at least twice a year,” she said. She has always been crafty, and handy with DIY projects.

“Painting and building is what I do to relax. Give me a can of fresh paint, turn on some music ... My husband says I’m the only woman he knows who wants tools for Christmas.”

Among the things Anja lost in the tornado: Photos from when she and Steve renewed their wedding vows five years ago. Her grandmother’s oil paintings. Her son’s childhood keepsakes — school papers, drawings, a Mother’s Day poem he wrote for her when he was 10.

“That’s the stuff I can’t get back,” she said. “But I’m still here. Nobody died. My son is 31 now; I told him he can write me a new poem.”

If there is one thing she learned through this ordeal, it is this: “As bad as it was, I have amazing friends. You truly realize how good you’ve got it.

“I’m still here. We had insurance. And dealing with insurance went smoothly.”

They were able to remodel — again — but bigger and better this time. “We basically built a new house from the ground up. New wiring, new plumbing.”

The old enclosed carport is now a spacious laundry room and a new den. They expanded the master bedroom and the master bathroom.

McCastle put her DIY skills to work constructing a wood feature wall near the front door. Pieces of wood in different lengths and colors are pieced together to make a striking statement.

“My husband bought me a nail gun, and I went at it,” she said with a laugh. “I started at 7 a.m., and cut and stained every piece of wood. I got done around 10 p.m.”

After the nightmare of the tornado, there is now a dream house. “Everything I ever wanted to do to this house, I got to do,” McCastle said. “I like to say it’s a blessing in disguise.”

Lisa Davis is Features Editor of The Anniston Star. Contact her at 256-235-3555 or [ldavis@annistonstar.com](mailto:ldavis@annistonstar.com).



Stephen Gross/The Anniston Star

The McCastles expanded the master bedroom when they rebuilt after the tornado. Anja McCastle is planning to build a barn door for the closet.

“I LIKE TO SAY IT’S A BLESSING IN DISGUISE.”

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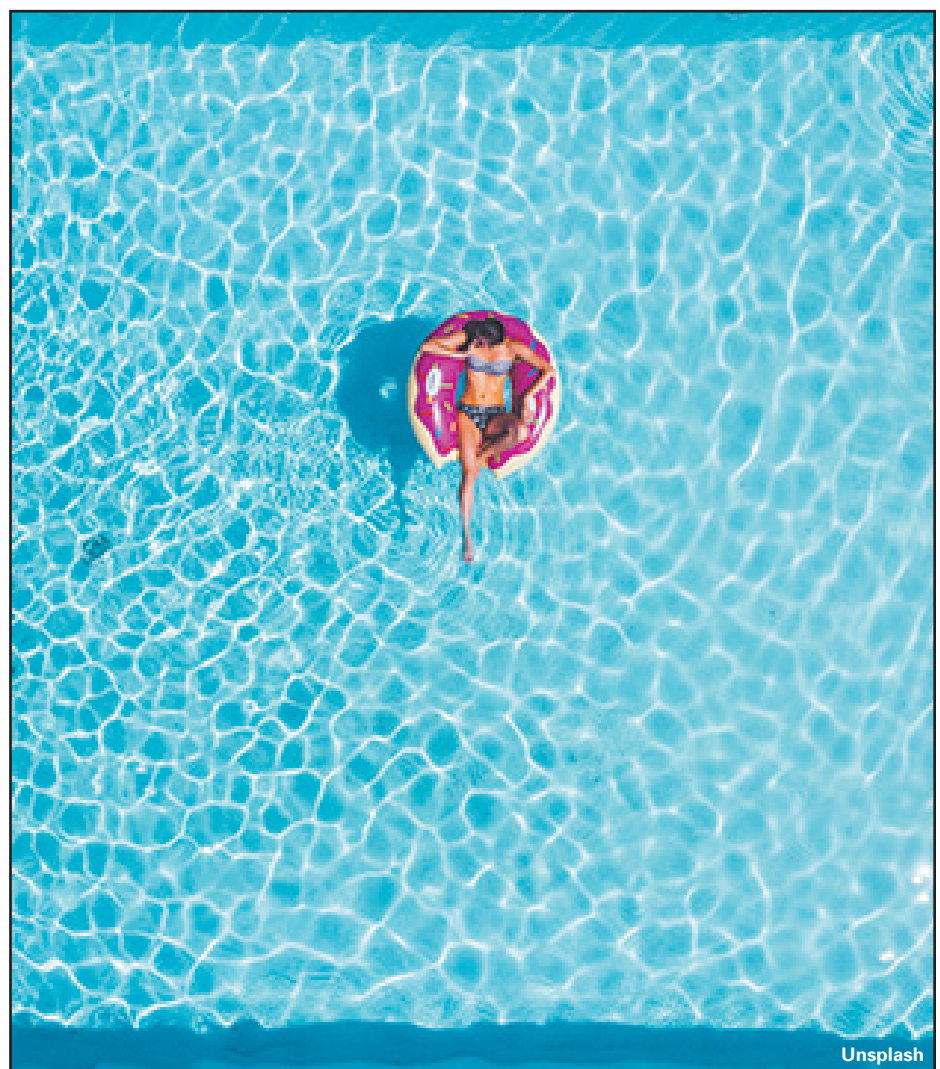
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# POOL CUES

*Tips for getting your pool in shape for summer*

By ANNISTON STAR STAFF

When it comes to judging the water quality in your swimming pool, don't believe your eyes.

Just because the water looks clear doesn't mean it's in good shape, according to Amy Knapp of the Pool Doctor in Anniston.

"Most people think that adding chlorine or bromine is all they have to do, and that because the water is clear and sparkling, it is healthy."

Not necessarily. "Clear water says nothing about the damage it could be causing to the pool and, worse, potentially swimmers' health," Knapp said.

"One of the most important things you can do for your pool or hot tub is to test your water to ensure both the safety and balance of the water."

"Water balance" is the relationship between the different chemicals in your pool or hot tub water. The water balance can change over time due to swimmers, the weather, the water source you use to fill the pool, even debris brought in by the wind, according to Knapp.

"We at the Pool Doctor like to compare water balance to the same things as making sure your body has all of the vitamins and minerals it needs to be healthy. For example, if the pool water needs calcium, it will leach it wherever it can find it — from the pool itself and/or the swimmers," Knapp said.

Two of the biggest health concerns heard at the Pool Doctor are burning eyes and itchy skin — both of which can be caused by poor water balance. "The human eye has a pH of 7.5, so for your

eyes to be comfortable, the pool water needs to be as close that range as possible to reduce eye irritation," Knapp said. "If you get out of a hot tub or pool water with itchy skin, chances are you have too much chlorine or bromine in the water."

Knapp is comfortable talking about chlorine and bromine because she has a degree in biology and chemistry and was a high school science teacher before she started helping her husband full-time at the Pool Doctor.

"With so many different chemicals out there and different methods of sanitizing water — from traditional chlorine, to salt-chlorine generators, UV/ozone and bromine for spas and indoor pools — it can become confusing," she said.

Pool maintenance is different than hot tub maintenance. The elevated temperature in a hot tub affects the water balance. But where a hot tub really stands out is the potential for bacterial growth. "What makes a hot tub attractive for a human is also what makes it attractive for bacteria," Knapp said.

Regular testing of your hot tub or pool water can not only protect your health, it can save you money. "Properly maintaining the water quality costs much less than fixing a problem like green water, which can take weeks and hundreds of dollars."

The Pool Doctor recommends testing pool and hot tub water at home at least 2-3 times per week, and professionally at a pool store at least once a month — or anytime something seems off with the at-home testing kit. "It is important to pay attention to the pH and chlorine/bromine levels and adjust accordingly," Knapp said.

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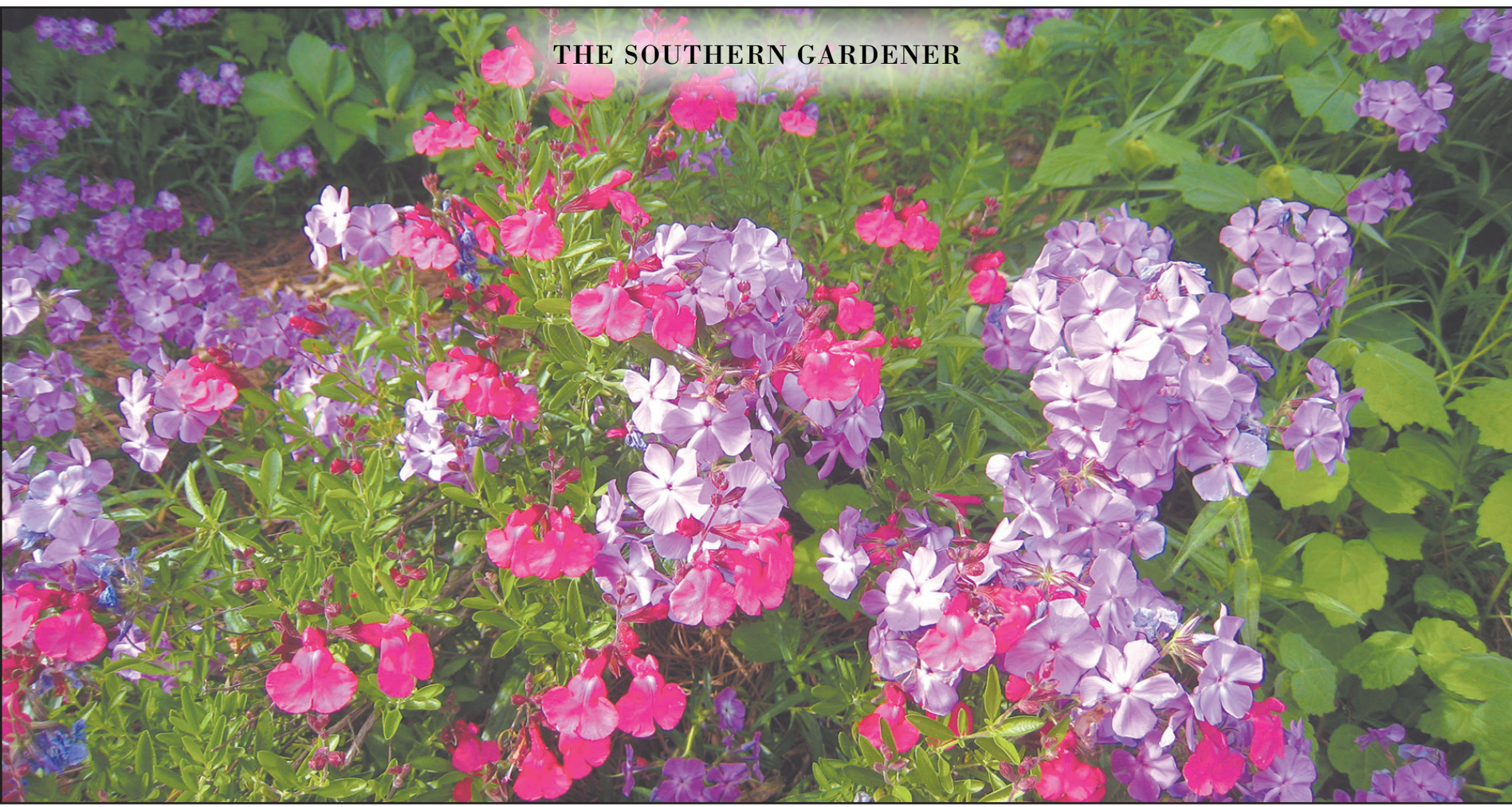
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## THE SOUTHERN GARDENER



Photos by Sherry Blanton/Special to The Star

## SPRING FORWARD

*Now is the time to get a garden ready for summer***BY SHERRY BLANTON**

Special to the Star

Spring is a dress rehearsal for summer. Spring brings with it changeable, often unpleasant, gardening weather. The beginning of spring still finds us in our winter mode.

In about as much time as it takes to turn the calendar page, May arrives and, along with it, much higher temperatures. We unofficially enter summer mode.

Summer is truly here on June 21, but by then we are already feeling the heat — and often even drought — before we celebrate the day with homemade ice cream and a bowl of peaches.

Spring into summer is a delightful time. We have so much to anticipate: homegrown tomatoes, cucumbers, squash, blueberries and baskets of Chilton County peaches.

The time to deal with summer is

spring.

Many gardeners use the few spring days before summer hits full force as a time to make plant selections as well as prepare their gardens for what lies ahead. Since we are never really sure what is around the corner weather-wise, my theory is prepare for what the past has brought (heat, drought or gully washers).

**Much ado about mulch**

If your garden has not had a layer of fresh mulch since last year, time's a wastin'. Mulch is the garden's friend. It keeps down weeds, conserves moisture, keeps soil from crusting, protects the plants from the weed eaters, adds organic matter to the soil and is just plain pretty. I have been asked if there is such a thing as too much mulch. Indeed, yes. Mulch should be about a couple of inches in depth. Mulch should never be piled up against a

trunk or a stem; that will cause decay and damage by pests and also rob the soil of nutrients. When you mulch, think doughnut, not volcano shape.

**When to prune**

If a nice day in early April inspires you to get out with your pruners, stop and think. When does the object of your attention actually bloom? We can do lots of damage pruning at the wrong time.

Follow the "May Rule" when pruning: If a plant blooms before May, prune it after it flowers, as the plant blooms on old wood (no later than July 5). Do not prune azaleas or forsythias in March or all the blooms will be cut off.

If the plant blooms after May, prune it before new growth begins in the spring; it blooms on "new" wood.

Of course there are always exceptions to every rule (just ask your children).

French or mop head and oakleaf hydrangeas bloom on old wood; they should be pruned after they bloom (by mid-July). Paniculata ('Limelight') and smooth hydrangeas ('Annabelle') bloom on new wood; they should be pruned in late winter before new growth begins.

**Inspect gardening equipment**

The days before heavy use begins should be used to inspect gardening equipment.

A lawnmower needs sharp blades to cut the grass neatly without shredding the leaves. While you are checking your lawnmower, make sure the blades are set at the proper place to cut your type of grass. There are many publications on Alabama Extension System website (ACES.edu) on how high to mow bermuda, centipede,

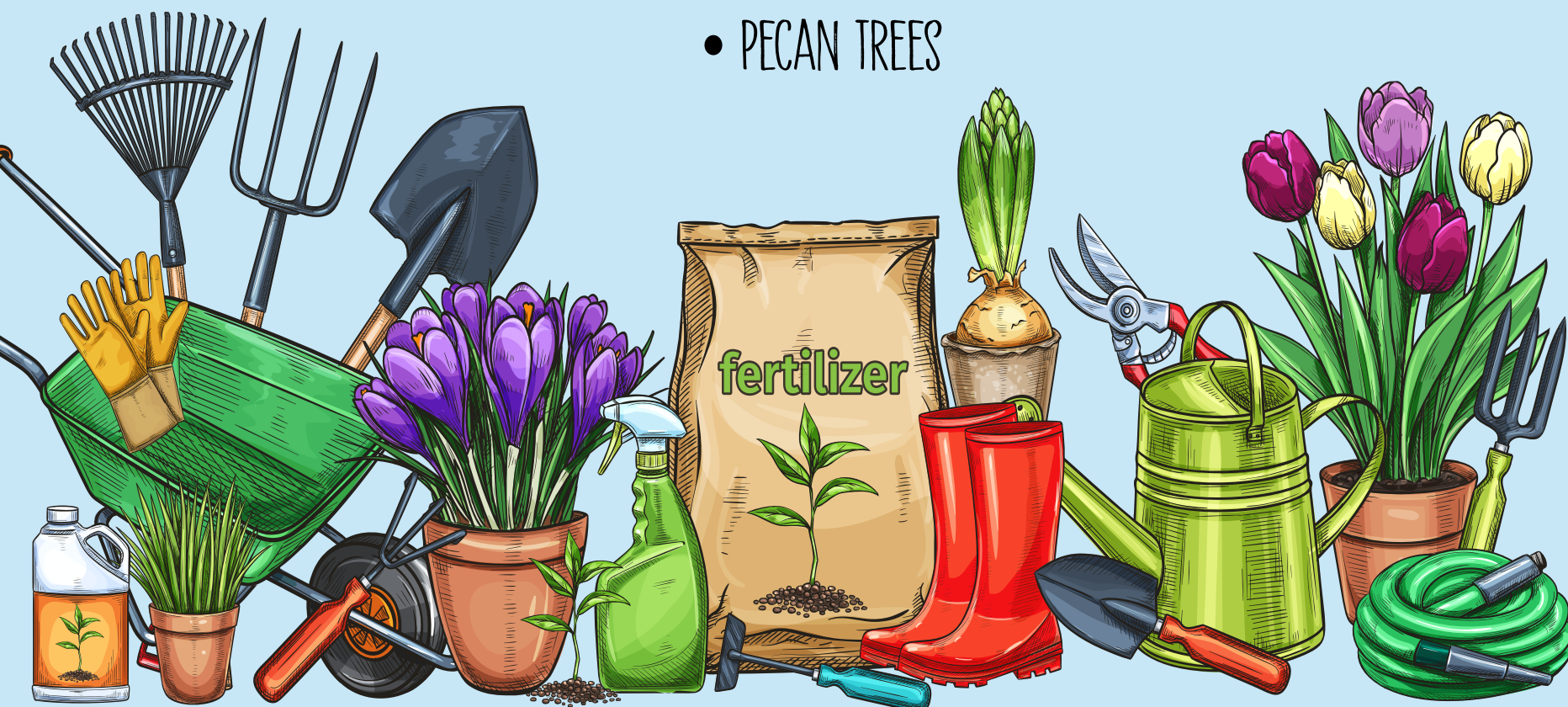
Please see **SPRING** | Page 8



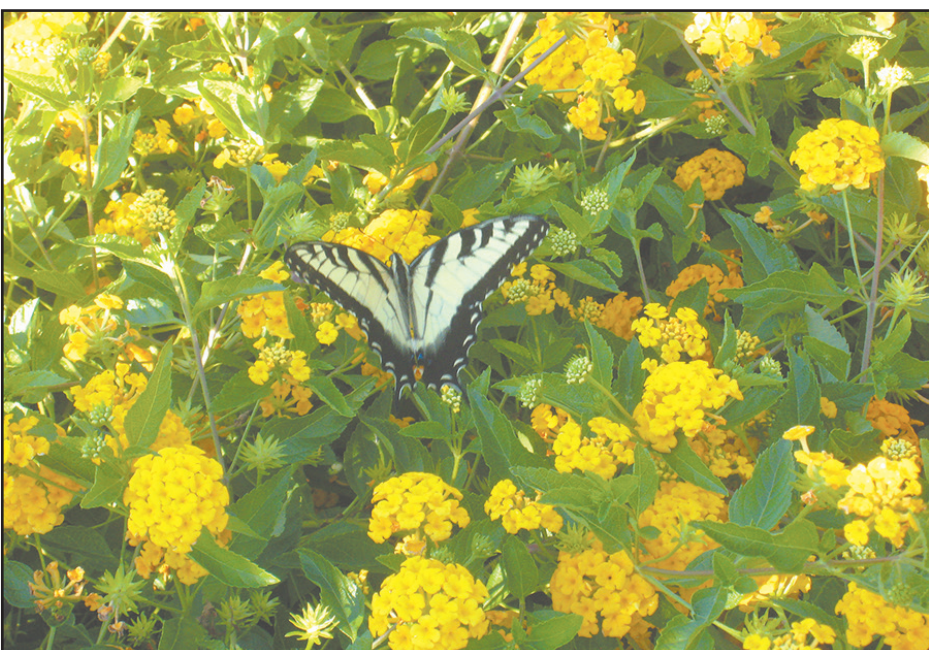
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## SPRING

Continued from Page 7

zoysia, etc. Cutting grass at the right height is an imperative to its health.

Keep your cutting tools in excellent condition. Sharp edges encourage an easier cut with less strain on the gardener and less damage to a plant.

### Make a watering plan

Although we have had lots of rain this winter, finally ending the drought, the time is going to come when we will start watering routinely.

Check hoses for holes and kinks. There are small gadgets for sale at the hardware store to repair broken hoses.

Invest in a good hose nozzle. They really do a better job and last longer than the cheap ones.

Plan on watering wisely this summer as water is becoming a precious commodity. Confine plants requiring lots of water to focal points. Teach your plants to be less water-needy by watering deeply and less often. Check your results by sticking your finger in the soil to check for moisture.

The best time to water is between 4 a.m. and 9 a.m. What, you wonder? Watering early gives the moisture time to evaporate off the leaves before nightfall, preventing fungus or disease. Watering during the heat of the day is unwise as the water can evaporate before it hits the soil.

Watering plants with drip irrigation is touted as the most efficient, as the water goes right to the roots and does not wet the foliage. Unfortunately, not every flowerbed or yard is suitable for drip irrigation. Drip, however, is an ideal way to water vegetable gardens.

The biggest water users are lawns, and it is important to know the lawn is getting the right amount of water. Set empty tuna cans or other flat cans around the lawn and measure the amount of water. Most lawns require an inch a week. Any more can be wasteful. A brand new lawn will require gallons of water on a daily basis.

### 'Drought proof' plants

Many gardeners are investing in "drought proof" plants. "Drought proof," however, does not mean "no water." These plants still need ample moisture until they have settled in — at least two years. Since planting conditions may vary, some plants (especially those on the south side of the house) may need additional water.

### Plan for a vegetable garden

For those who want to get the first tomato in the neighborhood in the ground and relish their summer gardens,

some crops should not be planted until after the last frost. Planting more than once over the summer encourages the garden to keep producing.

As you select your vegetable plants, search out the varieties with virus and disease protection. That information is available on the label. For information on having a prolific vegetable garden, ACES.edu is an outstanding source of information.

### Shop wisely

Late spring tends to be the most popular time for plant swaps and sales. A word of caution: Know what you are bringing home. Some plants are actually "plant spam"; they come and unfortunately never leave.

In late spring (May and June), the garden centers are stocked with amazing annuals, perennials and shrubs. Looking at those beautiful specimens is so tempting. We tend to overbuy, often not having a clue as to what we will do with the latest haul.

For the sake of a plant's health (and your sanity), have a plan in mind where all these plants will go. Without some prior thought, plants often go into a place that is not suitable for them.

Please remember to plant all the sun plants together in the sun, shade plants all together in the shade, all the water hogs together (and in a spot close to the water source) and separate from the drought-tolerant plants. These decisions will help the plants thrive, especially during the heat of summer.

### Last but not least

Get a soil test! No matter what the season, a soil test is essential for a healthy garden. If you have not had one in two or three years, it's time to get a new one.

Sherry Blanton, "The Southern Gardener," writes about gardening for The Anniston Star. Contact her at [sblanton@annistonstar.com](mailto:sblanton@annistonstar.com). Follow her on Facebook at Southern Gardener-Anniston Star.

### MEET THE SOUTHERN GARDENER!

Anniston Star gardening columnist Sherry Blanton will present several programs this year at the Public Library of Anniston-Calhoun County. All programs are at 2 p.m. and are free.

**April 9:** Azaleas

**May 21:** Perky perennials

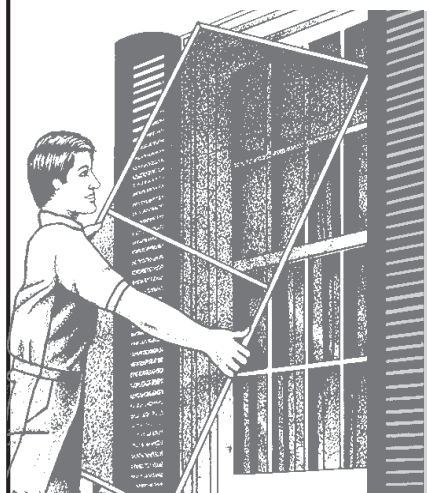
**July 9:** Color

**Aug. 6:** Plants with bad habits

**Sept. 17:** Berries and grasses

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Stephen Gross/The Anniston Star

A large display of garden art for sale at Miller Sand and Landscape Supply in DeArmanville. On a windy day, this owl stake will flap its wings.

## Miller Sand adds garden decor shop to Anniston location

BY DANIELLE STALLWORTH

dSTALLWORTH@ANNISTONSTAR.COM

What started as a garden and gift shop attached to the Miller Sand and Landscape Supply store in Anniston has blossomed into an outdoor treasure trove. Step onto the property, and you've stepped into a vibrant wonderland of eclectic garden statues, babbling fountains and wind catchers galore.

In 2018, Miller Sand expanded its outdoor center to include a variety of garden decor items. Owner Craig Miller explained that the business wanted to offer unique, hand-selected pieces that could not be found at superstores like Lowe's and Home Depot.

"Every month there's something else new. You'll have one person come by, and an item may be too gaudy for him. But then the next person will come through and say 'I love that! I've been looking for something like that!'" Miller said.

The outdoor area includes a variety of animal figurines and statues, decorative stones, yard signs, birdbaths and flower pots of all shapes, sizes and color.

"It's not the inexpensive kind of pottery that gets wet and freezes one time then cracks all to pieces. It's quality product," Miller said.

Visitors are also greeted by the soothing sound of trickling water, as the outdoor area is home to several working fountains and small ponds. The fountains are made by Massarelli, an American company specializing in stone garden accents, and come in a variety of shapes and sizes. The Miller Sand staff has been trained in fountain installation and care.

"The fountains have been a big seller, and we'll install those for you as well," Miller said. "You've got some that are traditional and some that are contemporary."

Smaller fountains can be found in the indoor shop, along with candles, rustic wall hangings and seasonal decor. It is currently housing an Easter-themed display, complete with white bunnies, dyed eggs and floral arrangements.

Garden decor is just the tip of the iceberg at Miller Sand. Customers can take their pick of different grasses, sods, soils, sands, gardening tools, pesticides, patio treatments — they even have synthetic pine needles that look

just like the real thing.

Alabama gardeners — and out of state ones too — swear by Miller's blended-on-site soils. There's a pH-balanced plant bed mix for shrubs and flowers, topsoil that is screened to eliminate big rocks or roots, and Miller's special "super soil" mixture for vegetable gardens.

"I cut up with people about it. I tell them to make sure to put a tarp over it when they leave, because if a bird drops a seed [in the super soil], a weed will be growing before they get home!"

Miller said he has had customers come from Georgia and Tennessee to buy "super soil."

"We'll get pictures of vegetables that they grew in it," Miller said. "The colors are so vibrant, they almost look fluorescent. You need those micronutrients and trace minerals to have that color and flavor in your vegetables."

"Gardening is such a therapy for most people. You'd be amazed how once you begin to do it, stress levels change. You're struggling with the world today, then you get home and you get with these plants or vegetables, and it's such a relief. And then you get to eat it!"

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Stephen Gross/The Anniston Star

LEFT: Owner Craig Miller shows off a colorful wind spinner and some of his other garden art for sale at Miller Sand. ABOVE: Miller holds a piece of synthetic pine straw blended in perfectly with real pine straw. Miller Sand sells both.



Stephen Gross/The Anniston Star

The indoor shop at Miller Sand houses seasonal gifts and decorations.



Stephen Gross/The Anniston Star

Colorful wall hangings and flowerpots of all shapes and sizes are available for purchase.

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# OH, FLUSH

## The care and feeding of septic tanks

BY LISA DAVIS  
ldavis@annistonstar.com

In Calhoun County, the majority of people are on septic systems, but it's a good bet the majority of people aren't taking proper care of their septic systems.

"The biggest problem with septic systems is that people do not have their tanks pumped regularly," said Tony Woodard, owner of Economy Septic Tank Service in Jacksonville.

If you wait until you have a problem — wet spots in the yard, slow-draining toilets, sewage odors — it's likely too late to pump the tank. "Pumping the tank when the problem shows up on top of the ground is like changing the oil in your car after you've blown up the engine," Woodard said. "You need to be proactively pumping your tank."

Woodard recommends this maintenance schedule:

- If there are 4 or more people living in the house, have the septic tank pumped every 3 years.
- If there are 2-3 people in a house, pump every 4-5 years.
- If there is only 1 person in the house, pump every 5 years.

"I don't recommend going more than five years, because at that point there's no way to know how bad it is," Woodard said.

Here are some do's and don'ts for septic system maintenance, courtesy of Woodard.

### DON'T

- Don't flush anything down the toilet that won't dissolve. That includes diapers, tampons, condoms and flushable wipes. "Flushable wipes are not really flushable. That's a misnomer," Woodard said. "They will ruin the system."

- Don't put caustic liquids like bleach, drain cleaner or paint down the drain. Acidic substances can kill the bacteria that treat the wastewater, and your sludge level will climb dramatically.

- Don't put kitchen grease down the drain. It can kill bacteria in the tank and cause buildup in the field lines.

- Don't waste money on monthly septic treatments such as Rid-X. All the bacteria needed to treat wastewater is naturally present in sewage. "Just have the tank pumped every 3-5 years and you'll be fine," Woodard said.

- Don't use a garbage disposal. "It just grinds up garbage; it's still not digestible when you put it in the tank. It just immediately adds to the sludge level," Woodard said. If you simply must have a garbage disposal, Woodard recommends installing an outlet filter on the septic system — and plan to pump the tank every 3 years.

- "You can put anything in a septic tank you want to — but the day will come when, moneywise, you'll wish you had not," Woodard said.

### DO

- Use the right toilet paper. "We recommend using single-ply Scott toilet paper," Woodard said. "We see a lot of problems with thick, quilted toilet paper, because it doesn't break down as fast." Woodard once serviced a tank that contained a brick of quilted toilet paper 12 inches thick. By comparison, he said, single-ply toilet paper will break down within 24 hours and be gone.

- Keep it simple. "Toilet paper, solid waste, liquid waste — that should be it. There's no reason to put anything else in a septic tank," Woodard said. "If you do that, and keep the tank pumped regularly, it will work."

Lisa Davis is Features Editor of The Anniston Star. Contact her at 256-235-3555 or ldavis@annistonstar.com.



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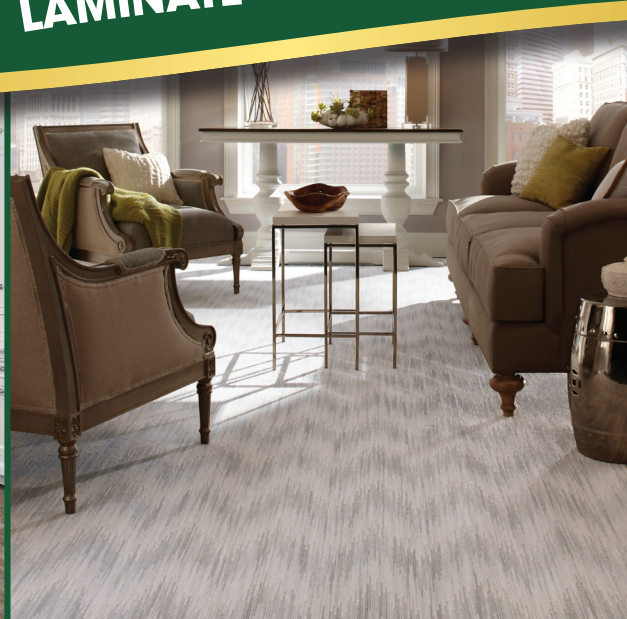




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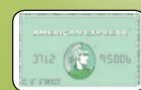
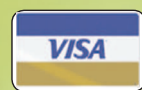
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