

# Yes, Government Agency Experts Really Can Help You

I grew up in the Permian Basin between Lubbock and Midland. When I was 10 years old I went to work for the farmer who raised cotton and grain next to our house. I have many fond memories, and some not-so-fond memories, of the 6 years I worked summers and weekends on that farm.

One of the memories I have is of the County Agent coming out, stepping off 10 feet of a cotton row and counting boll worms in order to calculate whether or not it would pay to spray for the boll worms. Even though the farmer I worked for had been farming for many years, he still trusted the County Agent to know more than he did about some things.

It was this same County Agent who helped me and my father pick out my first 4-H animals (three lambs). He later rode with us down to Fredericksburg to help choose a 4-H calf. He taught me how to care for and show the animals, and he tried, not completely successfully, to teach me how to identify grasses.

So I learned early on to take advice and help from knowledgeable people, and that even when you think you know something, it never hurts to consult an expert.

County Agents are now called AgriLife Extension Agents and they are part of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service, a state agency affiliated with Texas A & M University. They have many functions these days, their primary one being to help farmers and ranchers solve problems that arise in raising their crops and animals. Thankfully, they also still support the 4-H program, which is certainly dear to my heart, and they sponsor the Master Gardener program which offers help to landowners with plant problems of all kinds.

And fortunately, the AgriLife Extension Service is not the only agency to offer help to landowners. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) not only operates the State Parks system and hunting and fishing activities, but they have Private Lands Biologists who help private landowners with all kinds of wildlife management issues, both game and non-game species, and habitat management for all species. This department also operates wildlife management areas such as the Kerr Wildlife Management Area west of Hunt where a large amount of what we now know about white-tailed deer and grazing management was learned.

Another State Agency, the Texas Forest Service (TFS) is especially important to Hill Country residents because this is the agency with the most knowledge about Oak Wilt. Another agency of importance to Hill Country landowners is the federal USDA/Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). This agency used to be known as the Soil Conservation Service, and they are particularly knowledgeable about grazing management systems and habitat management as well as erosion control and riparian area management.

Unfortunately, all of these folks are overwhelmed with more requests for their services than they can possibly handle, but they somehow manage to always have time to talk to people. In addition, all of these agencies have publications and websites that contain a wealth of information. And guess what? It is all free! You have already paid for it with your taxes.

There are a couple of other organizations that can help landowners with questions and land management issues. For people with gardening questions (vegetables, flowers, lawns) the Master Gardeners, who are sponsored by the Extension Service, are usually able to help.

For landowners with questions about native plants, habitat management and other land management issues the Texas Master Naturalists may be helpful. The Master Naturalists are sponsored jointly by the Extension Service and by TPWD.

I can't emphasize enough how important it is to get information from trained, knowledgeable experts. There is a lot of misinformation out there about what causes this or that, how to fix it, and what you should or shouldn't do in managing your property. Your brother-in-law, or the guy down the street, or even some business owners, may be the nicest, most well-meaning folks you could ever know, but they might also steer you in the wrong direction.

The old carpenter's advice is still valid, "Measure twice, cut once". Do your research, get information from the experts, then act.

Here are phone numbers and web sites for all of these agencies and organizations:

Extension Service: 830-257-6568,

TPWD: 830-896-2500,

TFS: 830-257-7744,

NRCS: 830-896-4911,

Master Gardeners: Call Extension office, 830-257-6568,

And, to talk to someone who knows about all of these other folks and more, Call Riverside Nature Center, 830-257-4837.

Until next time.....

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