

Gardening with the help of a smartphone

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Since it's too hot to plant and prune in the real world, I decided to try my hand at virtual gardening.

Not the first in line for a smartphone, I'm late delving into the high-tech library of garden apps. But a hands-on gardener could use a tool that puts information within a finger's reach.

With a best-seller list in hand, I shopped my iPhone [App Store](#) like I do a shoe warehouse. The experience was similar: so many choices, so few good fits.

Some field guide apps are helpful, even fun. But generalized plant lists and Wikipedia articles have limited use for the Texas gardener faced with a long growing season marred by extremes.

What am I missing? Gardening friends couldn't say. Garden Rant blogger [Elizabeth Licata](#) has even written that she's "over" garden apps. Although the thrill is gone, she sees a future for this relatively new media.

"I think we can agree that smartphones and similar devices are here to stay, so special-interest apps will be needed for all the constituencies who use them, and that includes gardeners," Licata told me.

And, like, color TV, garden apps could improve over time.

"I love any kind of ID app, like Shazam, which identifies music when you hold your phone up to the sound. I'd like to hold my phone up to a weed, bug, tree, perennial or whatever, snap its picture and have all the info come up on my phone. There. I'm happy," Licata said.

Throw in native plants, tropicals and disease IDs, and I'll be happier, too.

Meanwhile, I'll keep some of the following apps on hand. But I won't be weeding out my garden books any time soon.

Love gardening but not math? Garden Buddy calculates it all for you: bed or pond size; mulch, soil and fertilizer amounts; plants needed to fill a given space; vegetables for a family of four. And it lists suppliers near you. Developed by Austin-based Island Apps, Garden Buddy's worth the \$2.99. Founder [Matthew Trachtenberg](#) says a revision coming soon will feature frost alerts. Imagine that in July.

Loaded with 15,000 plants and good photographs, GardenPilot is among the most comprehensive gardening apps. I signed on for the information written by heavy-weight horticulturists [Allan Armitage](#) and [Michael Dirr](#). Developed by [Scott Cissel](#) - and a bargain 99 cents - GardenPilot features 13 plant categories. Under annuals, I was pleasantly surprised to find nine varieties of flowering maple, a heat-tolerant bloomer for the Texas garden. Azaleas, narcissus and crape myrtles also get good play. The app features the usual search filters - color, bloom season and location. But there's also a novel collection search, which includes Proven Winners, Southern Living, watersmart, Monrovia and Burpee Home Gardens.

Audubon's Wildflowers of Texas, \$4.99, from Green Mountain Digital, has 862 entries that can be searched by shape, color, region and bloom period. The photos are decent, the range map is helpful, and I've got few complaints about the descriptions from this trusted name. One glaring exception: Included is *Lupinus subcarinosus*, the bluebonnet originally named Texas' state flower. (Years later, all six native species got that honor.) But where's *L. texensis*, our most common bluebonnet?

Even a tree hugger can be stumped identifying every species. Photograph a leaf against a white background and Leafsnap names the unknown tree. A collaboration between [Columbia University](#), the [University of Maryland](#) and the [Smithsonian Institution](#), this free app IDs trees found in the eastern United States. But many also grow here, and a country-wide app is in the works. Meanwhile, flip through the library of species (complete with photos of leaves, fruits, petioles and bark) to learn the difference between a red buckeye and sassafras.

Garden in Texas and you garden with bugs. [Darren Gates'](#) Bugs and Insects, 99 cents, covers more than 3,000 common landscape creatures, including 1,600 beetles and 500 butterflies. Aphids, chinch bugs and whiteflies also get screen time. The close-up photos make for easy identification; descriptions are thorough. Missing: How to control unwanted pests.

Given the heat and drought, a snake may be hunting for food and water in your garden. Most are harmless, and many are beneficial, so identify before striking it with a shovel. [Texas Tech](#) herpetology graduate student [Jeremy Weaver](#) makes that easy with his 99-cent TX Snakes app. Search by pattern or county to ID what's seeking shelter in your backyard.

A bird's song cheers a grumpy gardener. Chirp! Bird Songs USA is a delight; it's \$2.99 from iSpiny. Tap to learn regional or all 206 bird songs. Tap the relaxing slideshow to watch and listen.

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