

Houston Habitat

HOUSTON GARDENER John Ferguson agrees that soil is a primary concern when growing perennials. John lives in Sugar Land, a suburb of Houston that rests on the infamous soil known locally as “gumbo,” or Beaumont clay. After several days of rain, gumbo has the consistency of chocolate pudding. A week later, it can be as dry and rock-hard as a stale brownie. After two weeks of no rain, gumbo starts to crack; one droughty summer John found cracks 4 inches wide and 5 feet deep along the bayou behind his house.

John, a soil engineer who owns a mulch and compost company called Natures Way Resources,

spreads 3 inches of native mulch on his perennial garden annually. He defines native mulch as chipped-up native trees, including leaves, stems, pith, and the cambium layer. John says 10 years of the chipped-tree diet have produced amazing results in his garden: crumbly topsoil 15 inches deep that will grow even hydrangeas and azaleas.

Although passionate about gardening, John has not always been an organic gardener. Seventeen years ago, while spraying a fungicide on his potato patch, John had a strong allergic reaction that sent him to the emergency room. The experience led him to explore how gardening could be both fun and safe. Inevitably, his interest turned to regionally native plants, which do not need chemical life support to survive and flourish. He then became enraptured with gardening to attract butterflies and hummingbirds, for which a high proportion of native plants and no chemicals are a must.

John's perennial garden, which is certified by the National Wildlife Federation as a Backyard Wildlife Habitat, is made up almost entirely of

Iris 'Plum Good,' below, and Turk's cap lily, right, thrive in the black gumbo soil of the Houston suburb of Sugar Land. Lanceleaf coreopsis, mealy blue sage, and the silvery leaves of Texas croton (*Croton alabamensis* var. *texensis*) provide a backdrop for fragrant pink phlox, scarlet sage, and yellow Texas star in this well-drained corner of the garden, far right.

