

Drought Tolerance In Plants

There exists a myriad of choices when it comes to water wise plants we can utilize in our PNW gardens. In Western Washington, we are blessed with plenty of rain to keep things green – except for summer. We typically enjoy a very dry Mediterranean type climate this time of year and must irrigate our gardens accordingly. If we consider the right plants for drought and follow some simple rules, we can cut down our watering needs in our home landscapes.

DROUGHT TOLERANT DOES NOT MEAN PLANT IT AND WALK AWAY! IT MEANS GET IT ESTABLISHED THEN WALK AWAY SOMEWHERE DOWN THE ROAD!

- Pay attention to shade vs sun and other issues... Under eaves? Slopes? Dry shade under trees? Reflected heat off the house? Then choose the right plants for the right spots in the landscape for success!
- Healthy plants that are fed are always more drought tolerant. Utilize organic fertilizers to build soil health and beneficial microbes to grow healthy roots.
- Soil is always key. Dig large holes and amend with compost (mixing 1/3 compost with 2/3 of your native soil) to ensure extensive and deeper root systems. The better the soil, the happier and healthier the plant.
- Drought tolerant plants need good drainage – be sure heavier clay soils are broken up and amended. Too much water around the roots brings the decline of drought tolerant plants. It is not that they cannot take our rain for 9 months of the year, but that water must drain through soil strata and not sit.
- Utilize mulch to conserve soil moisture, especially on new plants. Spread 2” to 4” of mulch around garden, being careful not to bury crowns or trunks of shrubs/trees too deep. Compost is an excellent choice, even bark if plants are fed well. Remember, bark takes Nitrogen out of the soil as it decomposes!
- Create basins around new plants and on slopes, especially with new plantings. This will focus your early watering efforts and saturate new specimens, allowing you to water less often. Don’t “bless” the garden!
- Water wisely – less often and deeply. Sprinkler systems should be run less often but for longer periods. If you hand water, soak thoroughly less often. Many times mulch/surface looks dry but there is plenty moisture still down with the roots. If you stick your fingers in the dirt and it is dry 3” to 4” into ground, then water deeply.
- Consider planting slopes/back corners in fall with rain. Some of these areas we don’t water much or we have a tough time watering in the summer. Try fall, it is

a great time to establish tough areas, establish roots and be ahead of the game for next year.

- Remember drought tolerant does not necessarily mean no water at all – it will steer you towards things that may need to be watered every 2, 3 maybe 4 weeks during dry summer weather, once established.

Getting to Know the Drought Divas.....

Let's Start with some NATIVES – and NATIVARS – after all they already like it here and don't mind the wet winter and dry summer.

FOR SUN – Kinnikinnick, Manzanita, Pacific Wax Myrtle, Mahonia, Ninebark, Elderberries, Salal, Sitka Spruce, Shore Pine, Sumac, Vine Maple, Lewesia

FOR SHADE – Mahonia repens, Mahonia nervosa, Mahonia aquifolium, Evergreen Huckleberry, Leucothoe, Salal, Vine Maple

There are many options you can utilize, but lets stick with some of the more useful choices for Western Washington gardens. You can look up many and explore options for cultivars of these plants to vary flowers, foliage, and growth habits.

PERENNIALS FOR SUN – Rosemary, Thyme, Lavender, Penstemon, Yarrow, Coneflower, Russian Sage, Euphorbia, Artemesia, Catmint, Blanket Flower, Sneezeweed, Agastache, Coreopsis, Sedums, Hardy Ice Plant, Bee Balm, Rudbeckias, Heucheras, Fescue, Blue Oat Grass, Phygellius, Gaura, Red Hot Poker, Wallflowers, Salvia, Germander, Oregano, Zauschneria

SHRUBS/TREES FOR SUN – Strawberry Tree, Pines, Cypresses, Spruces, Juniper, Ceanothus, Rockrose, Nandina, Euonymus, Potentilla, Lilac, Butterfly Bush, Hebe, Redbud, Smoke Tree, Caryopteris

PERENNIALS FOR SHADE – Hosta, Epimedium, , Hellebores, Heuchera, Saxifrage, Dipsorum, Disporopsis, Tiarella, Liriope, Bergenia, Pachysandra, Foxglove, Bleeding Heart (will go dormant), Aстранtia, Hardy Cyclamen (dormant in summer), Cranesbill Geraniums, Lamium, Ajuga, Sword Fern, Shield Fern, Male Fern

SHRUBS/TREES FOR SHADE – Sarcococcoa, Hybrid Mahonias, Microbiota, Kalmia, Aucuba, Leucothoe, Fatsia, Eleagnus