



Drought-Tolerant Plants

Written and photographed
by Sean James

Despite a wet spring and plenty of rain early this summer, the weather is becoming less predictable. Your garden will be better if you prepare for the most challenging weather. A xeriscape or drought-tolerant landscape will handle wet years as well. When we have to be careful with every last drop, there are alternatives to plants that need watering. Also, who wants to spend money when they don't have to, especially on something so unnecessary? Unfortunately, public perception needs to be adjusted first. Many of us believe that xeriscaping is boring, bordering on ugly and difficult. Peel Region has a new program called Fusion Gardening which aims to show people that beauty and drought tolerance can be married perfectly, while reducing maintenance.

Certainly there are many boring drought tolerant landscapes out there but that could be said of landscapes in general. With all the new, bright-flowered and bright-leaved varieties, (technically they're cultivars and, in botanical terms, varieties are something else) of plants available to gardeners, it's easy to create a stunning and eco-friendly garden that uses minimal water.

Deep Roots

The first and most important lesson is that drought-tolerant plants actually require more water during the first year of growth. Their root systems need to get deep into the ground to find the water and that takes time. Plant an Astilbe, which is by no means xeriphytic, and a couple of



Anise Hyssop, Black-eyed Susan and Purple Beech offer multiple seasons of interest without using much water.

weeks later it's as established as it's going get. It will, however, kick off during the first dry spell. Purple coneflower, (Echinacea), and blazing star, (Liatris), are very patient plants which grow slowly and carefully, hedging their bets against adversity. Some of these all-stars have roots which go down six feet into the soil in search of water.

Drought-tolerant plants include most of the ornamental grasses, most of the prairie plants and many shrubs such as Potentilla, junipers and ninebark. (If you think xeriscaping is a challenge, you should step inside my mind while I'm writing this and see how hard I'm trying to pick just the best plants from the giant list of options!)

Shade gardening is not a challenge. Just go for a walk in the woods some weekend in August. You'll find the ground is cracked and dry yet the plants are doing fine. Native ferns, grasses, Canada wild ginger, shrubs such as pagoda dogwood, and a host of others are, if you'll forgive the pun, right as rain. There are many non-native options as well such as Hosta, 4 o'clocks, Himalayan maidenhair fern, (*Adiantum venustum*) and, believe it or not, Yucca. They're all great candidates for a shady, low-water-use garden. With all that texture and foliage colour, your garden can be the most interesting on the street!

The big three most drought-tolerant shade plants are flowering raspberry,

(*Rubus odoratus*), Solomon's seal, (*Polygonatum sp.*) and big-root geranium, (*Geranium macrorrhizum*). They're pretty much bullet proof. If you find you're still having challenges, thin trees to let light and water into the garden. It's better for your trees as well since it lets air flow through, limiting disease infections and also reducing "sail" – the amount that the wind can push on a tree and damage it.

Keep Water In

Mulch! Mulchmulchmulchmulch!!! Do I have your attention? The biggest thing you can do, beyond proper plant choices to reduce water use, is to mulch with at least two inches of rich organic matter. Composted pine mulch is the best. If you can't find it at your local garden centre, ask them to source it for you. In some areas, such companies as Less Mess can deliver it by the bag. Mulch keeps water in the soil and keeps the soil cool in the summer. It gets worked into the soil by worms and acts like a sponge to hold and slowly release moisture. It also promotes the growth of mycorrhizal fungi, which help plants take up water and cool themselves. Nuff said?

This subject could be a whole course, never mind a column. The point is to get gardeners thinking about all the options available. Still, don't get too stressed. Just try a little bit at a time and have fun with the learning curve. Gardening is supposed to be a hobby and a meditative one at that. Enjoy. **NEV**

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