

Plant for Dry!

Xeriscaping is the approach to gardening that does not rely on copious amounts of water. To succeed with this method it is necessary to select plants that, once established, are happy in a dry area. It is also essential to prepare the soil with compost and humus as nothing will grow without the nutrients obtained from 'good dirt'.

Some irrigation, drip systems and soaker hoses, do water the root zones and don't sprinkle the neighborhood. It is much less expensive to establish such a system or a collection point for your rain barrel in your initial planning than to retrofit later, but none of us have 20/20 foresight. A friend has a century old house with a rather rich assortment of rooflines that, with the cooperation of a rainy weekend, will fill a 500-gallon tank. With her vegetables in raised beds not a drop of that wealth of water is wasted. I am sure it was a lot of work with part of it on paper before this DIY project was started.

By concentrating the thirstiest plants together in a small area, you can ignore those able to survive on what nature provides. Most native plants do not require a lot of water, and they are happily becoming more available commercially. If the deer are munching their way down your garden path, try planting more Arkansas bluestar, *Amsonia hubrichtii*, one of the narrow-leaved species. In my garden the *Amsonia tabernaemontana* has not been eaten although the neighboring daylily has lost its season's entire supply of buds. *Amsonia t.* has elliptical dark green leaves that are not as spectacularly gold in fall as the narrower leaved varieties, but they all have the pale blue star flowers in spring. The *A. hubrichtii* is the 2011 Perennial Plant of the Year. Any of the bluestars are eco-friendly as, once established, they survive heat and drought even in full sun. *A. ciliata*, bluestar or blue milkweed, has deeper blue flowers and thread-like leaves.

I do know another Southern favorite, *Baptisia*, aka blue false indigo, is heat and drought tolerant but I don't know if the deer relish it as the voles ate mine first. Several shrubs, too, are low water-use, among them *Juniperus communis* (creeping juniper), *Myrica pensylvanica* (bayberry), *Aronia melanocarpa* (black chokeberry,) *Cornus racemosa* (grey dogwood), *Sambucus Canadensis* (elderberry), *Symphoricarpos orbiculatus* (coralberry, Indian currant) and *Viburnum trilobum* (highbush cranberry).

Ornamental grasses (not lawns) tolerate droughts well as do sedums, ice plants and herbs, especially rosemary. *Monarda* is undemanding as are black-eyed Susans in their many forms. To spot a plant that requires less water, look for white, grey, fuzzy, or silver leaves, such as lambs' ears and santolina. Thick stems and puffy leaves tell you those plants store water for dry days and plants with deep taproots such as echinacea and butterfly weed are water thrifty. Thick, fleshy roots like those of daylilies also provide drought tolerance.

Even some roses do not need that hypothetical inch-per-week. Rugosas survive and no rose is lovelier or more fragrant. Some of the new ground-cover roses and those bred for neglect, like the Knock Out roses, are also a water wise choice.

You know not to water the air, but two or three inches of mulch helps retain whatever moisture is there. Equally important is the addition of compost to the soil so that sandy beds retain moisture and the clay soils drain well.

If your interest in our natural resources is coast to coast you will enjoy reading Robert Glennon's "Water Follies" and "Unquenchable". You do not need to be either an engineer or a hydrologist to appreciate the information presented. These two books are not jeremiads and best of all, they offer examples in places where solutions have worked! They should get attention.

Decades ago I read what has become a classic, "Cadillac Desert" by the late Marc Reisner. I remember thinking at the time that this history about the slow emptying of the Ogallala aquifer that underlies the plains states, should be in every classroom in the country. Without sex and violence, it never got much attention and we continue our profligate ways. Attitudes may be changing even if slowly. We know that when we drink a pint of beer, gallons of water have gone into its production and we understand that when we dine on steak about 15,000 quarts of water have been used in its creation: we are beginning to realize these commodities are special treats, that mindful eating is a necessary part of our future.

Perhaps you have noticed, like smoking cigarettes, drinking bottled water, unless it comes from your own faucet, is becoming socially embarrassing.