

Out of drought grows Wisdom

The Pacific Northwest is in a drought. Droughts in general are nothing new to our area. During history, this corner of the World often faced severe dry periods and overcame it. What is different and how should we act now?

Droughts in the past were severe, but lasted only one may be two seasons. Long dry periods were very rare. The drought we are facing now is the driest so far in a long and overall dry period. For several years we were getting less and less rains in critical growing seasons. The repeated exposure is starting to wear out the vegetation in our average gardens and disturbed native areas.

In history drought was followed by rainy periods and nature balanced itself. Whether we are in the middle of a climate change or not, the weather is changing on the global scale and we have no guarantee to have plenty of rain in the near future. Fresh water is becoming a very precious commodity in most parts of the Planet. People are challenged all over the World by this issue, but challenge is what builds creativity and character. Our first reaction is fear of course. We can rise above it quickly and embrace it as a Call For Greatness.

We have to change the way we think of gardening and landscaping. We have to expand our palette of plants and materials to include tougher, less needy plants. We should celebrate this situation because deep in our hearts, most of us, even “die hard” horticulturists, wanted gardens with less maintenance. Drought resistant landscapes are definitely less needy, yet beautiful. Plants from other areas of the country and the World, like Northern California, Colorado, New Zealand and Siberia are generally worth a try in our garden beds. Most plants that handle extreme cold can handle drought since plants cannot take up water in either conditions. It is a good idea to make sure none of the plants are being considered noxious weeds in the state of Washington before planting them.

A large number of our native plants, especially of the forests and beaches, are excellent choices for dry weather. In the forest the thick canopy blocks most of the rain from ever reaching the ground, so plants of the forest floor are used to dry conditions. Many treasures hide in the forests, such as rare native orchids, shrubs, and trees. Restored forests increase the property values and add an unusual adventurous dimension to a site.

Lawns and most annuals need lots of water. Lawns contribute in many ways to pollution in our area. The Pacific Northwest has very few native grasses, but these are not suited for lawns. As a result we have to treat our lawns regularly with several chemicals and water them frequently to make the areas look nice and lush. We also have to mow the lawn and most lawnmowers run on gas with emissions worse than a smoking, old truck. Planting meadows and pastures in large areas can often be a solution if grass is an ultimate desire. These sections can be used for grazing animals or be mowed much less frequently than regular lawns. Most prepackaged wild flower mixes contain seeds that are in the noxious weeds category in Washington. For this reason it is better to buy flower seeds packaged by species and mix them at home. It is good to know, that these plants are self seeders and can invade other areas.

The best solution managing lawns is to reduce them or even eliminate them if possible. Planting drought resistant or at least tolerant groundcovers, shrubs, and trees instead of turf will save money, water, and energy on the long run, while it enhances the site. Paths and patios can be included in the area as well as playgrounds. Dry creek beds, stones and rocks, pots, and garden art displays provide interests in a garden and need no watering at all!

Groundcovers, once established, will act as live mulches. Mulching planting areas and exposed soils with other organic mulches also helps to cut down water usage because it retains moisture for long periods.

Micro-irrigation or drip systems are much more effective than traditional sprinkler systems and they use less water. Rain can be collected for garden use in barrels specially designed with easily accessible facets on their sides.

Drought tolerant landscaping and water-wise gardening is long overdue in the Pacific Northwest. Now we are called to take our place in the World as responsible caretakers of the wonderful gifts Nature surrounds us with. We can become part of the solution, pioneering in water conservation.

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