



to beat the heat is now

Many plants and lawns wilt during the height of summer. If you start to plan now, your garden can cope with drought.

BY RICHARD RIX

How our lawns and flowerbeds baked during last summer's drought! If it is in fact the start of a new weather trend, then we should all reappraise our gardening habits through such measures as: water conservation; water diversion; soil amendment; and the use of alternative plant materials. It's not too early in the year to start.

Let's begin with water conservation. Water is obviously a fundamental need of all plants, but knowing how much they can use and when to give it to them will prevent huge amounts of wastage.

If you must water your beds and lawns, then try to do it in the early morning. That way, you won't lose vast amounts to the evaporative rays of the sun. You also



reduce the risk of mildew and fungus growth that is inherent in watering toward nightfall, when plants must stay wet and cool for many hours. Watering on overcast, humid days is fine too – even during light rain – for that's when plants are most receptive to moisture.

Think carefully about watering the lawn at all. Even if it seems to really dry up in July and August, the lawn generally

bounces right back when cooler, wetter weather returns. If you must water the lawn, don't just sprinkle it, for that encourages shallow root growth, which is not desirable. Rather, you want the roots to go deep in search of moisture to sustain the grass during hot spells, so if you

water, leave the sprinkler on for two to three hours. Once a week should be enough.

In the garden, annuals need a lot of water for their size, since their root systems are shallow. There is no need to be lavish: a periodic soaking around their bases using the trusty watering can does the job quite nicely. Remember to hold back on fertilizer during drought, since it can burn the roots, and plants tend to go dormant then anyway.

Moving on to water diversion, when water was cheaper and more plentiful, house builders thought nothing of connecting our downpipes direct to the sewer lines and diverting valuable rainwater from our roofs. These days, the City of Toronto and other municipalities have free programs that enable you to redirect rainwater onto lawns, beds and into barrels. They will even create underground pipelines for you so as to avoid flooding walkways, with the terminal being a pop-up trap that drains to a lawn or flower bed.

If putting in a rain barrel, do be careful that the roof of the house isn't too large for it. Even a big barrel, if it's expected to hold the runoff from a 100 square meter roof, will reach an overflow condition in about a half-hour



A barrel will capture rain runoff for use in dry spells.

during heavy rain. Sometimes, the runoff from a small area, such as a garage or shed, can be put to good use by draining it directly on to the base of a strategically placed shrub or tree. Just watch it take off afterward!

Conserving moisture

The best way to conserve moisture in the soil is to add humus to it, which can be achieved by digging in compost or peat moss. Humus will help to hold moisture that would otherwise drain away quickly. Compost has the advantage

of supplying your plants with slow-release nutrients. While peat moss supplies no nutrients, it is acidic, which most plants like. The April-May period is a very good time to amend the soil, for it will cause minimal disruption to plants.

A mulch is another good idea for retaining moisture, particularly among shrubs or on larger beds. It can be a covering of almost any material, including stones, though wood chips are an excellent choice. Mulch has the added advantage of keeping down weeds, since they can't germinate readily, and it is also a splendid idea for plants in large containers.

Best plants for dry soil

Gardening with little or no water is known as xeriscaping, and many cottagers have been practicing it for years, even though they might not realize it. They have to practice it, since they cannot always be on hand to water their plants during periods of greatest need. As such, they avoid most annuals and stick with drought-tolerant perennials, such as the Achilleas, Centaurea, Echinops ritro (Globe Thistle),



FRITILLARIA IMPERIALIS

Photo courtesy: Lee Valley Garden Flowers, Salamander Books Ltd.

Gaillardia, Potentilla, Sedums, and most denizens of the rock garden.

Many bulbs enjoy a wet spring followed by a dry summer in which to restore their strength for next year without the risk of rotting in the ground. That's why it's generally best not to plant bulbs in a heavy clay soil. You may, in fact, wish to add builder's sand to the soil just so water will drain away sharply. Bulbs still need nutrients however, and leaf mould or compost (mixed with the sand) will oblige.

Among bulbs well worth trying in dry spots are the Alliums, Eremurus (Foxtail Lily) and Fritillaria (the best is *imperialis* – well worth trying though not reliably hardy around Toronto). Muscari (Grape Ivy) is another good choice with an early period of bloom, though you will likely have to wait till fall to source and plant it. 🍁

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