

Gardening Help in the Heat

By Laura Chaney

Photo Credit: Lee Finely

Historically, our summers are hot and dry which takes a toll on the garden, as well as us! In the blast furnace we affectionately call home, the name of the game is often just keeping things alive. Between dealing with the heat, watering issues, and plants not producing – gardening in the summer is a challenge. Read on for some helpful tips and solutions to common problems to apply to your summer gardening this year, and in the years to come.

- **You know what they say about the early bird....that bird doesn't get heat stroke! Now** personally, I'm usually a night owl so if I'm saying getting up at the crack of dawn is worth it – listen up. Not only are early mornings (and thus lower temperatures) easier on your body, they are also the healthiest time to be messing with plants. Plants are stressed in the heat of the day and they use lower nighttime temperatures to recover. After they've had all night to recover, they are ready for any pruning, harvesting fertilizing and watering. Doing these activities at midday or in the evening, will cause even more stress to the plant and can result in damage, like fruit splitting. Plus, vegetables and herbs will have the best flavor at morning harvest. No one wants limp or wilted basil!

- **While we perspire, plants transpire!** Transpiration doesn't just allow the plant to transport nutrients, it also is how the plant tries to cool itself. Don't we all wilt a little under stress? So yes, a little wilt is just fine! While a plant may look like it needs water right then, watering is the last thing you'd want to do. Remember: heat stress during the day, recovery at night. The only thing that should be getting lots of water during the hottest hours should be you (and your pets)!

- **Besides being bad for the plant, watering at inopportune times can be a huge waste.** Water evaporates so quickly in summer heat that it takes so much more to deeply water a plant. For strong root systems, you want waterings to reach as deep as possible. Drip systems can be a great solution in some garden areas. To gauge watering depth and effectiveness, a moisture meter is a great tool to have for less than \$10. Additionally, Mulch maintained at a depth of 3 inches is one of the best investments in any garden. Wood mulch holds moisture in the soil and fights evaporation. It is also very healthy for plants by insulating the soil (keeping roots cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter) and adding nutrients to soil as it breaks down.

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- **Keeping things alive is great, but what about keeping plants producing?** Depending on the plant, there may be a few things that will help sustain flowering and pollination when temps are above 90 degrees. Other vegetable plants may also need a little help with pollination. Pollen starts losing viability at 90 degrees and pollinators slow down during high temperatures. If you have lots of flowers, but not a crop, hand pollinating can help. Perennials and annuals on the other hand may stop flowering altogether. During your early morning garden puttering, be sure to dead head old flowers from annuals and maybe give a good prune to perennials. For example, I will give a haircut to my established salvias to shape them up and encourage them to bloom. I also plan a good cutback this month for most of my perennial bushes for a good bloom in the fall. Finally, if you want an easy crop that LOVES the heat and produces all summer, grow okra next year! Just be ready to harvest all the time. Okra is one vegetable you can and should harvest whenever you see it is the right size, come back even a few hours later and it may be too big!