

Time to re-evaluate our planting strategies

By Nan and Jerry Warren

Novice gardeners should not feel discouraged. Master Gardeners' yards have suffered just as badly in the extreme heat as anyone else's.

We have pulled and composted the once lovely begonias that had returned for the second year (southern location, 3 inches of mulch). The azaleas that have been declining since the removal of a pecan tree that protected them from the afternoon sun finally croaked.

The new hydrangea that had been placed in a container to be viewed from a favorite chair is a scorched lost cause. Things that didn't look so bad just 2 weeks ago are now goners. We are frugally watering the lawn and trees hoping that it will be enough to keep them going until it rains. Yet there are still some bright spots in this desolation.

Rosemary, French hollyhocks, germander, creeping plumbago, asparagus fern and several other native or adapted plants remain relatively immune to the incessant high heat. Turks cap and hesper aloe, humming bird nectar plants, are still doing well. Plumbago is a surprise performer. This ground cover has bloomed gentian blue for weeks now with little additional water. It also did well with last year's above average rainfall. It seems to be a great plant for this area in semi-shade because it adapts to our climates.

While Master Gardeners have lost many plants, we are trying to view this as an opportunity to re-evaluate our landscape plan, which we want to be as low maintenance as nature allows. Gardening is a process and there are things that we can do now to limit loss the next time we have severe la nina weather.

We have learned that excessive dry heat is harder on plants than drought alone. So we can look for plants that tolerate zones 7 – 9. Plants that are not at home in our alkaline soils are immediately more stressed so these should be avoided.

Instead of impulsively buying plants because we "love" them and then trying to find a place where they will thrive in our outdoor spaces, we must begin to consider the space first, then find a plant that likes those growing conditions.

We can replace some of the water hungry, work intensive lawn with mulched planting islands, decking or pavers.

For example at our house, the narrow space between the side walk and street receives mid-day sun and it is difficult to water. We have several options: 1) We could just put down weed barrier and rocks or mulch. 2) We could throw out some wild flower seeds and try to reclaim a piece of prairie. 3) We could incorporate containers and art.

We will most likely place a large stone and plant something like dwarf maiden grass for three season interest, a low evergreen, some bulbs and maybe some hardy sedum, covering the ground with mulch of some kind.

In a few weeks, the heat will abate, but use of water should always remain conservative. Do put water out for birds. They help keep the insect population under control.

This has been an exceptional summer. Those who are new to gardening need not give up. Master Gardeners (overthegardengate.org) can help guide you. Fall is the best time to garden in North Texas and it is only a month away!