Bell County Master Gardeners

Tip of the Week

By Candy Mullen

“We are in Drought, Part Three”

One of the weather conditions we must be aware of these days is the fire possibilities of our region and what to do about it. When the county places a “Burn Ban,” we really must take it seriously. What can we do? Don’t burn brush, garbage, or anything else, even in a “controlled” environment. Don’t toss that cigarette butt out that window at any time while driving; grill carefully, no fireworks for that birthday celebration, and don’t have a campfire when you are out in the woods! A “Burn Ban” means exactly that, no burning, period!

Did you know that scientists have a system in place to monitor the droughts’ severity? It is called the Drought Monitor. This year, the percentage of exceptional drought in the state was the highest since the United States Drought Monitor began tracking the data in 2000.

The 2011 Texas wildfires are an ongoing series of [wildfires](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wildfire) that peaked in April and May 2011 and burned more than 3 million acres across [Texas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Texas). That doesn’t mean they are gone, we must still be cautious. The fires have been particularly severe due to the ongoing [drought](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drought) covering the state. Exacerbating the problem is an unusual convergence of strong winds, unseasonably high, consistent temperatures, and low humidity. The Texas winter wildfire season began on November 15, 2010. A [La Niña](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Ni%C3%B1a) weather pattern that began in the summer of 2010 brought widespread drought to Texas.

A pattern of troughs from the [Pacific Northwest](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pacific_Northwest) brought strong winds over the [plains](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Plains). These weather conditions coupled with an above normal grass fuel loading created conditions for an active fire season. We have all seen the devastation and pictures on the news and seen burned patches on the roadsides.

Tracking drought blends science and art. No single definition of drought works for all circumstances, so people rely on drought indices to detect and measure droughts. But no single index works under all circumstances, either. That's why we need the Drought Monitor, a synthesis of multiple indices and impacts, that represents a consensus of federal and academic scientists. The product (Index) will be refined over time as we find ways to make it better reflect the needs of decision-makers and others who use the information.

The hot, dry conditions we are seeing now in July are not going to get better. The longer it persists, the longer it will take to recover from it. Our aquifer is being depleted. We must all practice conservation of water, follow guidelines of safety, and take care of the critters and wildlife in our area. On the index, we are in extreme (D3) drought conditions now. Hopefully we won’t get to D4, the worst on the scale. Look around, don’t waste our precious resource, but continue to care for your permanent plantings and don’t expect to have a “green lawn.” After all, this is Texas in July; we expect things to be mostly brown!

Have any questions about gardening in Central Texas? Contact ask.bcmga@gmail.com