

Hot, dry summers may be the new norm

If you moved to Douglas County within the past five years, you would probably think that the summer drought was always a four- to five-month stretch with no rain. In reality, this area used to see quite a few light rains in May and early June and again in late September. With this longer dry period becoming the norm for Western Oregon, it is important to start adapting your landscape and gardening practices to match this pattern.

You may not remember that 2015 in Western Oregon surpassed 1934 and 2014 as the warmest year on record. 2018 will probably end up being just as warm as 2015. 2018 is also on track to surpass 1974 as the driest growing season on record.

I would suggest that if you have to water your lawn, flowerbeds or ornamental shrubs more than twice a week with a total of an inch of water or more, you probably need to think about adapting your landscape to a more drought-hardy selection of plants. I walked around my landscape recently and noticed many spring flowering trees and shrubs like dogwood, viburnum, escallonia and rhododendron are looking pretty sad, with scorched leaves and sunburn spots.

I have been applying about a half-inch of water per week over the past five summers. These plants seem to survive, but their health and vigor have suffered, and diseases are starting to cause significant dieback.

I have noticed a number of plants that have done rather well during this hot dry period: Shasta daisy, yarrow, gaillardia, helianthemum, candytuft, Russian sage, barberry, ceanothus, rock rose, ornamental grasses, lavender, sage and rosemary. All of these plants have looked great with just a half inch of water a week during the summer. Most of these plants would have survived on less water but probably would not have grown as well.

If this recent trend to hot, dry weather and low river flows continues in the coming years, it will be important to understand what steps you can take to be a successful gardener with these growing conditions. The first thing to work on in your garden to improve your level of success during hot dry years is the soil. I have seen my garden get better results every year, including the tough years of 2014, 2015 and 2018,



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Extension Spotlight

because I have grown cover crops each winter to improve the tilth, structure and ability of the soil to hold moisture.

I also have

applied biochar and compost to my vegetable garden site to improve nutrient and moisture holding capacity. And I mulch heavily around all my vegetable crops with shredded straw-like material. The straw I use is recycled prunings from my ornamental grasses. Without building great soil, it is difficult to be both sustainable and successful. One of the reasons I like to garden in the soil and not in raised beds is that during hot dry years, it is much easier to keep soil cool and moist. Raised beds have the advantage during wet cool years, or if your yard has been scraped clean of all the soil.

Another thing that you can do to minimize the negative impact of hot, dry weather on your garden is to water wisely. Try to use soaker hoses where possible; they are nearly 100-percent efficient, with minimal evaporation, especially if you put mulch over the soaker hose. Sprinklers are about 75-percent efficient under cool,

windless conditions and fall to about 40-percent efficient under hot, windy conditions. That is a lot of wasted water, and the plants aren't getting as much as you think. If you use sprinklers, water in the early morning when air movement is lighter, and the plant leaf surfaces will dry out during the day, minimizing plant disease. When watering vegetables and perennial plants, it is better to give them a good soak a few times a week. Know the plant's rooting depth. Don't water lightly every day. If you have built a good soil, it will hold moisture for at least a couple days.

If you would like to learn more about how to convert your landscape to a xeriscape that is made up of drought hardy plants and other great gardening topics, go online to our web page at <https://extension.oregonstate.edu/douglas>, Upcoming Events, to find an application for the Master Gardener program that starts Jan. 8. The application period ends Sept. 28 or when class is full.

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