

Beat the heat with drought-tolerant plants



Debby Finley
Ask a Master Gardener

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Question: The ongoing drought worries me. I want to grow plants that are water-smart, but I don't want to sacrifice variety and color for a desert yard filled with cactus. Can you help me?

AnsWER: Water is a precious resource, and many gardeners are rethinking the plants they use in their landscape in order to conserve water and cut costs. Some of these water-thrifty plants such as penstemon, daylilies and rudbeckia are commonly referred to as "drought divas" and can provide beauty and function in the landscape.

Drought-tolerant plants have built-in features to maximize water uptake. Plants may have reduced leaf areas or large leaves with deep indentations (sinuses) between lobes in the leaves to reduce their water transpiration. Another sign of drought tolerance is leaves covered with a heavy accumulation of wax or the presence of fine hairs on the leaves that trap moisture at the leaf surface.

When creating a water-wise landscape, select plants that match the site conditions. Drought divas vary in their dependence on water, and a plant's drought tolerance also depends on soil, climate and location. Areas in your landscape may significantly vary in soil type, exposure to sunlight and wind, evaporation rates and moisture levels. Group plants together that have similar water and sun



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Daylilies are known as "drought divas" and are a great way to add color to your garden amidst Oregon's increasingly dry summers.

exposure needs. Keep the water-demanding plants together in a site close to a water source.

Organic mulches like compost, shredded leaves, aged wood chips, straw, or rotted hay provide a multipurpose defense against drought. An annual layer of mulch conserves water by keeping soil cooler, moisture levels more consistent, and by reducing surface evaporation due to drying winds. It also helps keep weeds at bay so that the moisture and nutrients are more accessible to your plants.

Water wisely with the right irrigation system, like drip irrigation, low-volume sprayers or bubblers, or weave soakers. A lightweight row cover will help protect susceptible plants from drying winds, and a temporary shade cloth will



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Penstemon is a popular choice for drought-stressed gardeners.

help minimize moisture loss from searing heat.

One water-wise perennial that deserves special notice is penstemon. With more than 250 varieties of penstemon in a rainbow of colors, there are many from which

to choose. Whether you have a hot spot in your garden that requires a plant that won't mind the lack of water, you want to attract hummingbirds and butterflies or you need a plant that will naturalize into your landscape, there is a penstemon just right for the job.

Daylilies are often called the perfect perennial because of their numerous qualities: Showy flowers, wide array of vibrant colors, drought tolerance, heat stress immunity, ability to grow in most hardiness zones and low care requirements.

Rudbeckia, or Black-eyed susans, are some of the most popular, toughest and most beautiful perennials grown today. They are showy daisy-like perennials that grow up to 3 feet tall, are



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Rudbeckia, or black-eyed susans, are a colorful addition that shows the skill and wisdom of a gardener during drought conditions.

easy to grow, hate soggy soils and do best in full sun. These flowers are very attractive to butterflies and songbirds and will garner you many compliments on your gardening skill and wisdom.

Do you have a gardening question? Email, call, or visit the Douglas County Master Gardener Plant Clinic at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, 541-672-4461, or 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg.