Drought Resistant Planting for Next Spring

By Susan Camp

In last week's "Gardening Corner," I wrote about the ongoing drought conditions on the Middle Peninsula and how to keep our garden plants and trees hydrated during this dry period.

Another week has passed without a drop of rain (and I am just superstitious enough to hope that writing about drought will break the spell), and the garden plants are perishing from thirst. I mentioned last week that in the future, we probably can expect higher temperatures leading to more frequent and prolonged periods without sufficient rainfall, not good news for local gardeners who are used to high humidity and frequent rain throughout the growing season.

It is unlikely that we will face a drought of the magnitude seen in California and the southwestern states, but we can begin to utilize some of the principles of xeriscaping, or landscaping in dry areas that are used in those regions. The concept of xeriscaping was developed in Colorado in 1981, and the methods can be adapted to any area that is projected to face significant water needs. VCE Publication 426-713 "Creating a Water-Wise Landscape" offers suggestions for gardening without wasting water. One recommendation is to observe and sketch your property and develop a plan that will take into consideration the need for water now and in the future.

An important consideration in a water-wise plan development is the selection of plants that will thrive without frequent irrigation. In the recent PennState Extension publication "Designing the Home Garden for Drought Resilience," Franklin, PA Master Gardener Annette MaCoy mentions several core concepts of xeriscaping, which include the selection of drought tolerant plants that can be planted in groups according to water needs; the addition of compost and organic mulch to enrich the soil and conserve water; and the addition and use of rain gardens, rain barrels, and appropriate irrigation systems and methods.

As you plan for spring planting, consider perennials that are known to require little water. Many are native plants, like blue false indigo (Baptisia australis) and its yellow-flowered cousins B. tinctoria and B. sphaerocarpa. These shrubby, upright members of the pea family have a deep taproot with an extensive root system and grow well in poor to average, well-drained soil in full sun. They tolerate drought, and, as an added bonus, deer avoid them. The purple or yellow pea-like flowers bloom from May to June. Bees and butterflies throng to them. After blooming, attractive charcoal-black pods appear on spikes among the clover-like, bluish-green leaves.

Many perennials with gray or silvery stems and leaves are drought tolerant, including members of the mint family with their square stems. A personal favorite is Russian sage (Salvia yangii, formerly Perovskia atriplicifolia), an Asian native. Russian sage does not tolerate wet soil and flowers best in full sun. The lacy, pale green stems bear whorls of dainty lavender to blue flowers all summer. Larger cultivars may flop over, but 'Blue Jean Baby' is compact and 'Denim 'n' Lace' has a more upright habit than some other cultivars.

Catnip (Nepeta cataria) and catmint (Nepeta x faassenii), a hybrid, also like dry to medium soil and will tolerate drought and poor soil. These low growing plants with gray-green foliage and lavender flowers bloom all summer. If they get leggy, just shear them back. They work well at the front of a border or surrounding a shrub like yaupon holly (Ilex vomitoria). Nepeta foliage, like many other mint family members has strongly scented foliage that deer avoid.

You might consider planting something a little different, like aloe Yucca (Yucca aloifolia) or Eastern prickly pear cactus (Opuntia humifusa). Both are native to the southeastern United States, tolerate drought, and repel deer. Both are attractive, but prickly pear can cause contact dermatitis, and yucca is toxic to domestic animals.

All of these perennials and many other drought (and deer) tolerant plants are included in the Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder and the NCSU Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox.