

Planting and Watering Wisely

By Susan Camp

The refreshing showers on Friday and Saturday's wonderful, cooling rain provided welcome relief from a hot, dry July. Most of our garden plants survived the dry spell, but some of the hosta leaves have turned yellow, and even the daylilies look ragged. The hardest job has been keeping up with the watering needs of the hydrangeas, which droop on a mildly warm day.

We might not suffer a prolonged hot, dry spell every summer, but we can improve our gardens without using excess water. Xeriscaping, sometimes called water-wise gardening, refers to gardening methods that utilize rainfall and natural resources, rather than depend on the community water supply or private wells. Naturally drought tolerant plants that survive with minimal irrigation are the key to successful xeriscaping. Many people visualize desert vistas of cactus, agave, and yucca when they hear the term, and those plants would look bizarre on the Middle Peninsula. Most desert plants could not survive our wet, moderately cold winters and humid summers.

Last October Jim and I spent time in Sedona, Arizona and visited the Grand Canyon. Both locales utilize xeriscaping with a variety of trees, shrubs, and native and non-native perennials, as well as the more familiar desert plants. Xeriscaping is a necessity in very dry areas. Not only do the plants provide beauty and shade, but they help prevent erosion from runoff during rainy periods. Even though our environment in Gloucester is very different from Sedona's, we can benefit from adopting some of the techniques used in the Southwest to conserve water and discourage erosion.

Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 426-713 "Creating a Water-Wise Landscape" offers basic suggestions on garden design, soil preparation, and efficient irrigation. A water-wise garden plan takes into consideration the use of the area, including foot traffic, views, existing trees and structures, and environmental conditions.

Efficient use of water depends on the condition of the soil. Sandy soil drains quickly and contains little nourishment for plants. Clayey soil retains moisture and, while reducing runoff, it can contribute to root and stem rot of plants. Properly conditioned soil contains 2 to 3 inches of compost or other organic material. Improved soil will retain moisture and allow plants to set deep roots during dry periods.

Plant selection is paramount to creation of a successful water-wise garden. Native perennials are good choices; many are drought tolerant. Naturalized and introduced perennials that require little water also will survive a period without rain. After the first year, all perennials will need less water. Group together plants with similar irrigation needs. Some good perennial choices are black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*), daylily (*Hemerocallis*), and gaura (*Oenothera lindheimeri*). Succulents like *Sedum purpureum* 'Autumn Joy' require little water and combine well with native grasses.

Mulch all plants with 2 to 3 inches of organic material each spring. Mulch helps the ground retain moisture, controls weeds, and improves the soil, decreasing the need for chemical fertilizer. Mulch can help reduce runoff and decrease erosion.

Most perennials require approximately 1 inch of water per week. Hand watering is not an effective method of irrigation because some of the water remains on the soil surface. Overhead sprinkler systems can provide effective irrigation, although there is water loss to evaporation. Water the garden in the morning and place sprinkler heads so that the sidewalk and the driveway don't receive most of the water. Drip irrigation systems and soaker hoses deliver water slowly, so there is little loss to runoff and evaporation.

A large expanse of manicured turfgrass drinks a lot of water, so consider replacing at least a section of lawn with a native, non-invasive groundcover. Mowing no more than one-third of the height of the turfgrass will encourage deeper roots.

The Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) website www.dcr.virginia.gov/natural-heritage/native plants and the Virginia Native Plant Society vnps.org provide lists of native plants appropriate for the Coastal Plain. Many entries in the Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder offer information on drought tolerance.

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