

Help Between the Covers

The Gloucester Library has a new book for gardeners, “Weatherproofing Your Landscape”, subtitled ‘a homeowner’s guide to protecting and rescuing your plants’ by Sandra Dark and Dean Hill, University Press of Florida. The authors are garden writer and landscape architect, respectively.

It is a primer for homeowners who hope to avoid the unpleasant (and expensive) aftermath of our increasingly virulent weather, those natural disasters of flood, wind, heat, and drought. Landscaping, even the modest plantings most of us have that may not merit the term, are an investment. Good plants help sell houses.

The good news in the book covers ways to mitigate the damage. For example, what to plant, where to put it, and is a group safer than a single specimen? Trees growing in isolation are more vulnerable to wind damage: there is safety in numbers. Avoid lollipop trees. Those with dense foliage like Bradford pears break off more easily than trees the wind can move through. Vulnerable especially are old and diseased trees. It is not always possible for the homeowner to judge the health by the appearance. Call an expert.

The book is helpful because, believe it, plants do not thrive on neglect, however benign. Not that there isn’t a lot of misguided attention around. Have you noticed this spring’s victims of crepe myrtle murder, that slow death by annual brutal pruning? Another helpful direction the authors give is to avoid fertilizer. Like a sick child, we tend to pamper a damaged plant. An injured or stressed plant does not need a boost of fertilizer. The plant is programmed to conserve its resources by slowing its growth. The authors comment that applying growth stimulants at that time is like giving body building steroids to a patient needing bed rest.

Perhaps we gardeners are too apt to think we know what is best for the plant but the plant may know better. Studies at Ohio Agricultural R & D center show that distressed plants produce defensive compounds that help it resist pests and if you apply growth stimulants you may slow that production.

Reducing lawn area protects shrubs and trees since applications of chemical fertilizers herbicides and pesticides sterilize soil beneath the turf where tree and shrub roots grow. By replacing turf with ground cover or mulch in a large area around a tree, even to the drip line, will keep it healthy. New to me is the fact that some very competitive turf-grass species such as Bermuda grass and Kentucky bluegrass release chemicals that can actually stunt trees. The drip line, the outer edge of a tree’s canopy may be the boundary of its root zone, but the total feeder roots extend even farther.

Because my ‘landscape’ features a dozen large and prominent stumps I was interested in ways to rot them away, without expensive removal. Drill holes a few inches deep or crosshatch it with a chain saw and cover with manure. Top with mulch or compost like icing a cake. Keep moist as it decays, knock off chunks with a sledge- hammer. It may collapse in two years.

Actually stumps are interesting as they tell the story of the tree. When the tree is standing it has two layers under the bark that are essential to its health. The phloem layer transports food from leaves to the rest of the plant and the cambium layer, the tissue beneath the phloem, forms a new trunk ring each year. Arborists 'read' these rings to know the weather patterns of the years in which they formed.

If you live in an area where drought is prevalent native trees are best able to survive. Unlike turf that requires an inch of rain a week, native trees and shrubs will live with ½ inch every two weeks, a blessing to your water bill! Our 'natives' may not be wonderful everywhere: the familiar eastern cedar, *Juniper virginiana* is a threat in the southwest, taking over 760 acres a day – more than 9 million acres so far.

Tidewater is an area where flooding is of special concern although other parts of Virginia are in equal or greater risk. Roanoke with its three rivers averages a major flood every seven years. It isn't just flood waters that damage trees but having been planted in poorly draining soil or even something as simple as growing in an over-watered lawn. The tree dies of drowning as roots require air. Some trees have evolved ways of surviving, like the bald cypress with its 'knees' that provide oxygen.