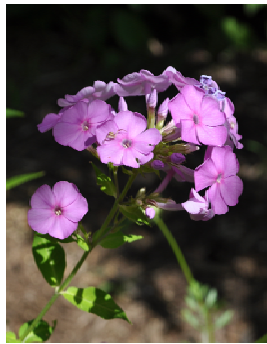


Saving Plants: Saving Water

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It is another scorching today and our garden is broiling under the fiery sun. This morning, I walked our landscape, noticing what was drooping and what was not. Thus, garden by garden, species by species, plant by plant, we choose what to water, for water is a precious resource in the hot Maryland summers.

Instead of expensive annuals, this year, I planted a perennial native gaura in the container on our front step; deep-rooted in a large pot, it requires little extra water, though bi-monthly fertilizing, to thrive. Its pink-flowered stems, delicate against dark foliage, are reaching gladly toward the sun.

Last spring, we ripped out the tough, invasive vinca on our front hill because of the damage that it can cause when seeds are carried to our woods and streams. The Mediterranean herbs—basil, thyme, rosemary and lavender—with which I replaced it have not flourished as I expected. I guess they are used to more water in their native Italy and southern France.

Under the trees beside our house, most of the plants are doing well, particularly the delicate native columbines and tough, imported hostas. Shade plants are used to moisture, though. Some of the natives were planted new this year and have not yet developed deep root systems, so I check to see if they are drooping and water those that need it. We are installing a rain barrel, a large terra cotta-like jar, connected to the downspout there; a soaker hose attached to it can be turned on, as needed, to keep the area moist.

In our edible garden, the herbs, like the weeds, are coping on their own but I had to rescue the potted mints that died back from drought. Mint is so aggressive that I never plant it in the ground but anything in a container is more vulnerable to drought, so I placed them on the back steps, where I can check them daily. We water our vegetables every few days if it has not rained—early in the morning or, when our schedules demand it, after sundown. The cucumber vine is languishing but I could not bear to lose the peppers and tomatoes.

Throughout our garden, many of the native plants are in flower—golden black-eyed susans, coneflowers purple and yellow, red cardinal flower, pink geraniums climbing the holly, sun-colored coreopsis, tall pink phlox and deep red trumpet vine are flourishing in this climate where they evolved.

Our grass, of course, is dying back. Like most cultivated turf in this region, it is a cool weather plant that goes dormant in the summer. We trim the plants high (2.5-3.5 inches), leave their clippings in place to become fertilizer, and let them live out their natural life cycle. They will green again when the weather cools down. Thus goes the summer--monitoring the drought and rain, and watering the plants that need more than the Maryland climate provides. And, since we also value our landscape as habitat, we keep the birdbaths and ground-level water dish filled.

You can download a list of plants native to our region, along with cultivation information, from <http://mastergardener.umd.edu/gardeningtopics/nativeplants/NativePlantsofMD.cfm> or a publication with color photographs from <http://www.nps.gov/plants/pubs/chesapeake/>. When you ask for them at nurseries and plant stores, be sure to use the Latin names, since some of the common names apply to other plants, as well.

Ruth H. Axelrod is a Frederick County Master Gardener and Chair of the Bay-Wise Committee, which focuses on conservation gardening to help clean up and protect the Chesapeake Bay.

For more information about the Frederick County Master Gardener/Horticulture Program, visit www.frederick.umd.edu/mg or call Susan Trice at the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County office, (301) 600-1596. The Master Gardener's mission is to educate Maryland residents about safe, effective and sustainable horticultural practices that build healthy gardens, landscapes and communities. University of Maryland Extension programs are open to all citizens without regard to race, color, gender, disability, religion, age, sexual orientation, marital or parental status, or national origin.