

How FC Master Gardeners Beat the Heat in July 2011

Here we go again with record breaking summer heat. Last year was bad enough but this year is even worse. Frederick County Master Gardeners share your pain. Here are some reports from around the county.

My big summer success is Malabar spinach. I had learned about this heat resistant, climbing plant and was eager to try it. With high hopes in the spring, I planted three plants around a tomato cage enclosed with an 18" anti-bunny fence. When the plants reached the top of the cage, we added a 6' bamboo stake in the center. All are covered with deep red vines with glossy green leaves. The plants are thriving in the heat. I have harvested daily for a month and we have enjoyed the spinach in salads or sautéed with garlic in olive oil. This will become an annual addition to my edible garden.

Linda Hause, Frederick City



Courtesy of Linda Hause



Preparing for the summer heat begins in April when I am planting my containers thinking about the material the containers are made, the plants going into them and the soil and amendments which will nourish them. Plastic containers hold the moisture more so than terra cotta. Large planters will hold more soil and give the plants' root system a place to grow. Choosing plants that thrive in the same growing conditions will yield healthier plants that can take the stress of a summer heat wave. I use moisture control potting mix, water crystals and in the coco fiber liner containers-watering mats.

Daily care is also needed. Water in the morning before the plants are stressed. Some days they may need a second watering. On very hot days I move my containers into the shade. Removing spent blooms will keep your plants from spending valuable energy setting seed and keep them blooming longer.

Must not forget to take care of the gardener too. Keep hydrated and wear clothing that wicks away moisture. Enjoy the summer.

Donna Scherer, Frederick

I'm aware of how this very hot weather is affecting my watering habits and limiting outdoor activities. It also reinforces the wisdom of the 'right plant, right place' principle.

I do a minimal amount of watering and weeding, unfortunately, but I try to do both these tasks in the early part of the day before the temperature climbs. I also limit my watering to those plants that are newly-planted, still getting established, and to those in pots on my deck and front porch. This allows me to water only two or three times a week - and only if we haven't had enough rain - for new perennials, vegetables and shrubs, and usually once a day for the plants in pots.

As far as the lawn is concerned, I prefer not to water it at all. Our small front lawn is planted in Zoysia grass, and since it's well-established, it seems to fare well with nothing but the rainfall. (I don't mind that it goes dormant in winter. I like the straw color it takes on, although I understand that not everyone is a fan of this look!) The back lawn is fescue, but so far it is also getting by with natural rainfall. This particular lawn gets plenty of shade from surrounding trees.

I've noticed that established trees and shrubs that are planted in the right place seem to do well despite the high temperatures. My flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida*) seems to be doing fine. This tree grows in the shade of my neighbor's river birch. My Carolina silverbell (*Halesia carolina*) grows in full sun, and is thriving. Blue star juniper (*Juniperus squamata* 'Blue Star'), blue fescue (*Festuca glauca*) and dwarf fountain grass (*Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Hameln') in full sun, azaleas in shade, lilyturf (*Liriope muscari*) just about anywhere, all seem to be tolerating the heat. On the other hand, I have a kousa dogwood (*Cornus kousa*) in a fairly sunny spot that is having problems with scorched leaves and dying branches. My PJM Rhododendron gets a bit too much sun, and I just watered it for the first time in 12 years. Its leaves were curling under just as they do during cold snaps.

On another note, I've noticed that an unexpected benefit of setting up a bird bath this summer has been enjoying the bees that stop by for a drink during the day. It seems they need the extra water, too.

Regina Irizarry, Frederick

With all the other plants wilting under the extreme heat, the weeds are thriving. I have been mulching with weeds. After a rain storm I dash outside when the weeds are easiest to pull and pile them around the plants that need it most. Of course, not using any weeds that are going to seed. Great for the compost pile too.

Vick Senires, Monrovia

I have left my gardens for 2 1/2 weeks in New Hampshire where it is also in the 90's. I hired a waterer, but I don't think anyone really realizes how much water it takes to keep everything going. I am currently investigating self irrigation systems for the vegetable garden which gets about 12 hours of sun a day.

Harriet Wise, Frederick City

I have learned over the last many years that my best-laid plans to water, weed, and otherwise be an exemplary Master Gardener to many new spring plantings do not survive the other pressures on my time - - so I have been cutting back what and how much I plant over the past few years. Some of this self-censoring is also due to the weather, and the hot and dry summers we continue to endure. I truly believe that Global warming is not a myth - and that this is what is fueling our severe winters and summers.

Over the past few years I have reduced or almost eliminated my vegetable garden to a very small plot of tomatoes, planted very close to the house to facilitate watering. I depend on friends with excess produce, and farmer's markets, for the rest of my fresh vegetables.

In anticipation of both a hard summer and with little time available for Garden TLC, I did not fill my container pots full of annuals this year, which typically line the side of the house, but thankfully the empty pots have been partially hidden by the grass, which continues to grow without any encouragement on my part.

I did succumb to some "deals" in late spring, and ended up with several pots of annuals in hanging baskets. After being away during the hottest part of this month, I was surprised to see when I returned home over the weekend that they have managed to survive this neglect. Maybe because they are hanging under very dense tree branches, and are therefore shielded from the severe sun, but they managed to even blossom with what little rain has come by.

With this severe weather, my only ventures outside are trips to retrieve the newspaper and mail, limiting my views of my gardens to quick looks, a shake of the head and a retreat back to the air conditioning - not even a promise to "do something" if it ever cools off.

Being a water well user, I decided during our last drought that I would not use our precious drinking water on plants, and have continued to hope that Mother Nature will help my perennials survive - although I have noticed some bare spots appearing in various beds. The fruit trees also seem to be suffering more than usual this year.

The problem with Rain Barrels (of which I have several) is that when you use them a lot - and it doesn't rain - they get empty!

Devra Boesch, Middletown

In the native plant garden, Joe-Pye weed was very stressed compared with other natives. It needed a lot of watering one evening, but has recovered quickly.

Most of the Viburnums were depleted in the heat last week, also with one good watering (five minutes per shrub) have recovered well. The old fashioned Weigelia shrubs (approx. 4 years old) along my driveway are showing no signs of stress and have not received any watering!

Trees planted last year(early fall, 2010), dogwood, katsura, cornelian cherry were showing signs of heat stress and have been watered once or twice in the past week; trees planted two + years are doing fine; thus far, no extra watering needed.

Vegetable garden is in raised beds and must be watered every day. Everything is heavily mulched with a newspaper barrier and then straw on top of it. It's making a big difference in keeping the tomato plants growing vigorously.

Started bean seeds (three varieties) two weeks ago and they all popped up within a week. All are approximately three inches tall; I water them every day.

I'm beginning to see signs of stink bug damage (minimally as of Monday, July 25) on tomatoes as they ripen, but have found only a few bugs thus far.

Moira Weldon, Middletown

I'm on municipal water: which, in our case is VERY expensive. So I do not water from the tap. Rain barrels are my best friends! And since we have had limited precipitation to recharge them, I am watering only essentials: a newly planted tree, potted perennials I couldn't resist buying (and which are awaiting better conditions for in-ground placement), and my herbs. I'm holding off planting fall-harvest crops until the heat breaks.

I've lost/let-go my coco-fiber lined hanging baskets. Sunny location with heat was just too much for even consistent watering. (Note that these already have a partial plastic liner to help with water retention.)

I've moved all my potted plants to shadier locations to wait out the heat - even full-sun lovers.

I'm walking my dog early and late in the day, for more, but shorter trips, and adding ice to his water bowl.

Susan Warrenfeltz-Rogers, Middletown

In case you haven't heard this a dozen times already, established native plants stand up to our hot summers naturally. With no rain in the rain barrel, there's nothing better than plants that take care of themselves. Our *Asclepias tuberosa* is blooming beautifully!

Teresa Gallion, Walkersville

MULCH,MULCH,MULCH. I am trying to keep the tomatoes watered consistently. I have them heavily mulched with straw to keep the soil from drying out. Basil LOVES this weather. I am seeing more bees this year because I have planted more flowers and lots of native plants in my garden.

Laura Robinson, Walkersville

Every morning I get up half an hour earlier so I can make sure I water all my potted plants before I leave for work. The plants that are doing best are my succulents (echiveria, the burro's tail), plus all my shrubs (boxwoods, viburnum, crape myrtles and even my hydrangea seem to be holding their own. Up until a couple days ago, my tall phlox looked fabulous...they are starting to droop now.

Lavender looks good as well as pineapple mint, hostas, black eyed susans, bee balm, coreopsis moonbeam, pansies and snapdragons.

As far as the plants I am trying to keep alive at all costs that would be my tomatoes, basil, squash, and thyme, which seem to be drooping every time I look at them. I have given up on my roses, clematis and the lawn which I have faith will all revive in the fall!

Sharon Riche-Dragon, Frederick

Plants in several spots in my garden seem to be doing okay with the hot spell. I have learned that the soil in these areas stay moist longer. Therefore, in the future, I will put plants that do not do well in arid soil in these areas. Several plants have expired in the really dry areas, especially where tree roots dry out the soil quickly. I have put sedum and donkeytail spurge in these areas and they are doing well in the dry soil and full sun. Also, the squirrels, deer and groundhog are not bothering the sedum and spurge.

The surprise plant is Shasta Daisy which doesn't look like a very sturdy plant. It is in a very dry spot, I have not watered it yet, and it has not wilted.

I am watering the expensive plants - Japanese maple, and some evergreens. I am hoping the perennials can take care of themselves and will come back next year if they die back this summer. Herbs are doing well with the heat though I am watering the basil.

I am shading the tomatoes and hoping for the best - losing many to blossom end rot, and the squirrels are stealing some green ones, leaving them in the tree and munching on them periodically.

The most conservative way that I have found to water is by using gallon plastic jugs (from milk, vinegar, etc) I punch a very small hole at the bottom front edge of the jug. They can be easily filled by submerging them in a trashcan filled with water. I sit several of the jugs in the root area of the small trees, and they are drip watered.

There is no loss of water as you have with sprinklers; and it is easier to get the water exactly to the plant which can be difficult with drip hoses.

Julia Cubit, New Market

I'm finding the heat and weather similar to last July, almost no rain. Thank goodness I have four rain barrels I use to top off my little pond. I thought ahead this year when I purchased thirty new plants by buying only drought tolerant natives. So far I've only lost one, a blanket flower. I watered them a bit after planting but not much since May. I do water my vegetable garden about every four days. All is well in the garden although incredibly dry. I'm on town water. Nothing seems to be deterring the rabbits from breeding however.

Susan Berte, Middletown

My two cents is that: I ignore watering the lawn because it goes dormant during hot, dry conditions; I water the garden once either in the morning or at dusk.

Sheryl Massaro, Frederick

Last spring I bought a *Vernonia noveboracensis* "Purple HAZE" at a native plant sale. I left it in the container it came in (4 in pot) and rarely watered it. I never had time to plant it & rarely watered it as it lay in the garage. I went away to the beach & didn't water it for about 3 weeks. It never really died, so it was destined to be planted. I planted it last fall in full sun as instructed on a slight slope. I watered it a few times in the fall and never again. It is doing fine! I NEVER have to water it. Directions said to plant in full sun, well drained soil. It will bloom late summer and grows 3-8 tall. It has tripled in size (about 3 feet) since last year. I can't wait to see it bloom.

Everything native I bought last year during the severe drought came back this spring and is all doing fine in this heat and looks great... LOW MAINTENANCE and my water bill has never been better :)

Teresa Blair, Frederick

My Black Eyed Susans are liking this dry heat. I'm being better about watering in the morning as early as possible. I'm using my rain barrel water sparingly and only on my potted plants. I'm staying inside from 11-4 during the worst part of the day. My son and I are bowling (KidsBowlFree.com) and playing more Board games!

Julie Nicholson, Middletown

This has been another challenging year for gardeners. With the excessive heat, we are watering our garden with tape, drip irrigation. We have a well and water the vegetable garden every other day as needed for about 30 minutes. We also have a rain barrel, which up to this point has worked well for watering our container plants on our patio. My husband and I have lost two plantings of green beans, due to a very hungry groundhog, which has never happened before in our many years of gardening.

Our tomatoes plants are doing well, but our zucchini are not producing as many as in years past. We are observing a small invasion of stink bugs but have not noticed any damage at this point, although when spotted, we destroy them with soapy water.

As for our flower gardens, the perennial plants are doing well, purple cone flower, Shasta daisy, sedums and day lilies, but the container planters are almost a daily chore. And of course, weeds thrive in any weather.

My husband and I enjoy gardening and continue to produce fresh produce each year, no matter what the forces of nature throw our way.

Patti Grove, Middletown

The only benefit that I have experienced w/ this heat is the speed with which our garden waste & vegetable scraps have turned into black compost. Maybe next year I'll plant bananas and cacti.

Dedra Salitrik

For my containers, I have been watering thoroughly each morning to get the flowers fortified for the heat of the day. Most of the pots have done great with just one watering but those with the sun-loving coleus plants have needed an afternoon drink as well. For the vegetable garden I have given it a good soaking once a week and all seems ok so far. I planted my garden late this year so no tomatoes yet, only have been eating the herbs. We have a new evergreen tree we planted this spring that I also have been giving a good soaking once a week and just hoping for the best. It seems to be doing fine but I don't imagine it will show distress right away.

I have also used those gator bags (I think that's what you call them) to give a couple of our trees water, once is a red maple, the other a saw tooth oak. They didn't look particularly stressed just trying to prevent any and those bags are super easy to use, would recommend them highly. This heat just requires dedication to watering, especially containers. If you are on well water I'm sure that makes it even more difficult.

Lisha Utt, Ijamsville

I don't know if this is weather related or not, but I have found that the "volunteer" plants (plants that came up on their own from seeds from last year's plants) seem to be doing better than those I planted. These are tomatoes, petunias, snapdragons. Most of my plants seem to be ok for the moment.

What usually happens is when we move into August, everything just seems to go to pot. The plants have had enough and the pests take over. I have a very hot yard it seems, so things seem just as hot as usual. I am watering more this year, but I think was because I haven't watered enough in the past. The first crop of larger tomatoes was cat faced and it seems that is weather related. The tomatoes were late to bloom, and my peppers for the second year in a row, are "not doing squat"! Squash is good. Carrots not so good. Peas didn't make it.

I talked to Elyse Phillips (fellow FCMG) the other day and she said she is seeing early fall color and some things are blooming a month early. She wonders if this is because of the heat or if it means we'll have an early winter. You might ask her. After talking to her I noticed the same. More trees around the area seemed to be stressed, to the point of partial or close to death.

Gabrielle deSilva, Frederick

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.