

Is It a Drought Yet? Part 2

Two weeks ago I discussed some things we can all do to conserve water. Today I want to discuss in a more general way some aspects of living in a semi-arid region. We humans are, I believe, fundamentally optimistic. So it is natural for us to look at periods of rainfall as normal, the way things should and will continue to be, while we view dry periods as abnormal times to be survived until “normal” times return. In fact, both periods are normal and to be expected.

If we can accept the above as fact, then we can get ourselves into a mind-set that expects both wet and dry periods and we can more easily adjust our lives and activities to accommodate both.

While water restrictions and/or reduced water availability are an inconvenience for those of us who have landscapes to maintain, consider the ranchers in the area. For them it is more than an inconvenience, it impacts their livelihood. Buying feed and/or reducing stocking rates, the normal responses to dry times, can be costly, and the overall condition and productivity of the land decreases as well. Likewise, wildlife, especially the overpopulated deer, will have less to eat in dry times.

Last week I discussed how to prepare your home to survive a wildfire. During dry times, vegetation dies or becomes dormant, or dries out so that the moisture level is low and thus the fuel value is high. Under these conditions, everything burns much more vigorously and dry winds cause flames to spread at an alarming rate. This is just one consequence of living in a semi-arid region, and why we need to prepare ourselves and our homes for it.

One thing to keep in mind in times like these, is that drought has happened before, lots of times. Most all of us are relatively new to the Hill Country. But the native trees and shrubs and forbs and grasses have been here for eons. And they have survived all this time with periodic fires, buffalo herds, Indian wars, European settlements, cattle drives, the dust bowl and the drought of the 50s. If our native plants have survived all of that, they will, for the most part, survive whatever is happening to us now.

Large mature native trees have seen several periods of drought in their lifetimes. In severe cases, if things get worse, some might defoliate, but will likely leaf out again when the rains return, or next spring. Grasses easily go dormant in times of drought, but green up after significant rain. Grass and wildflower seeds can survive many years of waiting for the right conditions to germinate, so in most cases they will return without any help from us.

Newly planted trees or shrubs are at the greatest risk of dying in times of hot, dry weather, mainly because their roots are still confined to the dirt that was in the pot they

came in and have not yet spread out into a larger area. This is why the preferred time to plant these woodies is the fall because they have more time to develop larger root systems before hot weather returns. So pay particular attention to any newly planted trees and shrubs, and make sure the root ball stays moist for at least the first year after planting. As planted trees grow, however, the area that most needs to be watered is under the dripline of the tree, not around the trunk.

Another thing to think about is the wildlife around your place. Their usual source of water may have dried up in the drought, so you might want to provide extra sources of water for birds and other wildlife during these dry times.

The point of all of this is that, we should consider as a role model the prudent rancher who stocks his ranch not for the best of times, but for average times, knowing that droughts will come. We should design our landscapes and maintain our homes with the thought that there will be times of little rainfall, and possibly water restrictions or well problems, so we need to be prepared for those times.

In other words, don't plant your garden expecting good rainfall, because you will be disappointed sometime in the future. Design your landscape assuming it will be dry at times, and you will be better able to survive the next drought.

Until next time...

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