

Native Plants and the Drought

For those of us who don't make our living raising plants or animals, and we are not yet worried about having enough water to take a hot shower, the drought concerns us mainly by what is happening to our trees, shrubs, perennials and grass. And while our current situation is not as bad as back in 2011, we are in the midst of a serious drought affecting just about everything that grows.

At our place, we have not had any significant rain since mid-May—the three hottest months of the year with no meaningful rainfall. [Note, this column was written on the 10th of August, just before we got ¾ of an inch at our house and significant rainfall is predicted for the next 2-3 days. So keep that in mind if some of what I write seems out of date.]

What I see around the house these days is mostly dormant grass, (We don't really have a lawn as most people would define it, just native grass cut short in a few areas and paths,) wilted or mostly dead perennials, some shrubs with very few leaves, and most disturbing--dead leaves falling from the trees, especially the post oaks.

Of course, big mature native trees losing their leaves in July and August always worries you a little. But my friend, Robert Edmonson, Texas Forest Service forester, explains it this way, "All trees will drop a few leaves when it gets hot and dry. It's just the trees' survival response. Fewer leaves = less transpiration/water use. Pretty ingenious for an organism that doesn't have a brain..." Most all of the big native trees you have in your yard now were growing during the drought of the 50s. They have seen worst times.

Back in 2011, one of our post oaks lost all of its leaves before September, but it came back as normal the next year and has been healthy ever since. I have even seen small cypress trees lose their needles in dry times but come back the next year healthy. I don't expect any of this will necessarily keep some of you from worrying, it doesn't completely keep me from worrying. But chances are they will all be OK.

Shorter-lived native species such as individual grass plants, perennials, and the smaller shrubs and vines may not have been growing where they are now back in the 1950s. But the native species were certainly here, growing in the area and surviving the drought of record, and they managed to procreate and their offspring are here now, so chances are they will survive 2018 as well, but if not, we will have their seeds and cuttings and you can get them back.

Notice that I keep emphasizing "native" species. Many non-native plants cannot survive really hot, dry conditions, which is one reason I, and many other folks, keep recommending that we plant only plants native to central Texas or adjacent areas. It is too bad that some of the most successful, invasive, non-native species we have around, chinaberry, Chinese tallow, ligustrum, and Arundo donax, seem to survive just fine in these drought times.

I am not suggesting that you don't water some of your favorite native plants that seem to be suffering, rather just to suggest that if you are going to water something, don't waste the water.

I have watched people hand-watering in a way that is totally ineffective. Spraying water on the leaves of plants does them no good and when you move on to another area, the water sprayed will just evaporate. What you want to do is to water the ground under the vegetation and to do so for long enough that the water can soak into the ground far enough to reach the plants roots. This is one reason why drip irrigation tubing lying directly on the ground is best. Fewer, longer watering sessions are better than many short sessions.

Once a lawn has gone dormant, it is not using any water or energy, so it is probably better to use your precious water for other things. If you can capture air conditioner condensate, or shower water, or even washing machine discharge, that is kind of like "free water," you can use on a few special plants.

Whatever you do, abide by the water restrictions in place at the time—it is the only fair way to use only your share of our limited water.

And, while it is a different topic, in these super-drought conditions, DON'T BURN.

Until next time...

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