

Plants for Dry Conditions

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Drought conditions being what they are, we may be challenged with dry areas in our lawns and gardens. Hopefully, all of us are conscientious about water restrictions and are doing our part to conserve. Instead of struggling with vegetation that seems to constantly wilt and need more water, consider plants that are adapted to cope with less water.

Even in regions where rainfall normally is abundant, plants can suffer from lack of moisture. When root growth is limited by concrete or asphalt, or when plants are grown in containers or in excessively well-drained sandy soil, moisture stress can be a constant problem.

In some cases, the soil may be improved by adding organic matter such as peat moss or compost that will help retain moisture in the soil. Also, mulching will help by reducing evaporation of water from the soil surface and keeping weeds in check. However, if plants seem to constantly dry out--in spite of your best efforts--you may want to consider growing plants that can withstand dry conditions. Using drought resistant plants may help reduce your water bill and the time you spend working in the garden!

Characteristics of plants that normally are adapted to dry conditions include thick fleshy leaves; very narrow leaves (such as those of many evergreen species); and hairy, spiny, or waxy leaves. All of these are adaptations that help reduce the amount of water lost from the leaves. Many drought tolerant plants also have very deep root systems. Plants that originate in dry environments also will have greater drought resistance.

Don't worry that your only choice will be cactus plants. For most landscaping situations, many plants are available that tolerate dry conditions. Perennial flowering plants that tolerate dry conditions include numerous herb species such as lavender, artemisia, sage, and yarrow. Many varieties of these plants have attractive, fragrant, silvery foliage in addition to colorful flowers that are attractive to hummingbirds and

butterflies. Sedum and species of coneflower, liatris, and sunflowers do well in sunny dry locations.

Colorful annuals that thrive in sunny dry conditions include portulaca--a low growing plant that reseeds itself and produces masses of flowers in nearly all colors. Vinca, which has shiny leaves and flowers of white to pink to lavender, works well as a border plant along hot sunny walkways. The brightly colored California poppy also grows in dry soils.

Many grasses adapted to prairie conditions do well in dry locations and provide habitat for birds. They serve as a landscaping focal point and can be mixed with perennial flowers for contrast.

Shrubs that tolerate dry conditions include many species of junipers, some species of cotoneaster, pyracantha, potentilla, and caragena. Many of these shrubs have berries that are both attractive and provide food for wildlife.

A local nursery can recommend plants for dry sites in your area. There are many locally adapted native plants that will withstand dry conditions and enhance your landscape for wildlife.