

How Can a Gardener Vacation?

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7-28-2010

February of my third year of gardening near Port Townsend, my spouse enticed me to vacation at Mount Assiniboine Lodge for 10 days in August. When one endures endless rain November through February, kick-backs in the sunny Canadian Rockies are permitted. I feverishly hand-watered beloved, newly planted trees, shrubs and perennials until the last possible moment with husband honking for me to join him on the journey.

At the height of a profound summer drought, no rain fell in my absence. Plants withered, some died. I wept upon returning. Never forget that:

- Drought is normal here from June through September, our hot months.
- Even drought tolerant plants need some water to survive.
- Potted plants dry fastest...poor prisoners.
- New plantings develop drought tolerance as their root systems mature over several years.
- Soil condition markedly affects water retention and availability to plants.
- Native plants have adapted to our droughty summers.

Steps to avoid grief include:

- Beg a neighbor or pay a gardener to water prized/expensive trees, shrubs weekly, deeply, especially when they are less than three years in the garden.
- Use water-retentive commercial potting mixes, not garden soils, in your pots. Gather pots in a shady spot near the hose so that kind neighbor can water efficiently, at least every other day in sunny hot weather.
- Improve your soil by keeping a 3- to 6-inch deep mulch on ornamental beds, taking care not to cover trunks and stems.
- Choose plants adapted to summer drought. Species from our own natives, Chile, New Zealand, high Southwest desert and the Mediterranean -- thousands of choices -- fill the bill.
- If you have the time, money and motivation, install drip irrigation on a timer for permanent plantings and vegetable gardens.

Most important, garden from the ground up. Sandy soils drain fast, need more frequent and shallow supplemental watering to hit plant root zones. Clay soils retain water, absorb and drain slowly, want water less frequently but deeply. Improve both types by adding organic matter, armoring your plants against prolonged dry conditions.

Take a stay-cation! July-September are our finest months.

See plant clinic dates and locations and other Master Gardener resources at <http://mg.jefferson.wsu.edu/>