

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
Date: July 24, 2005
Contact: WSU/Skagit County Extension: 428-4270

Every region of the world has particular climatic conditions that affect the plants home gardeners can grow. I grew up in the cool, moist climes of southern England, where every summer event comes with a back-up plan, in case of rain. Then I moved to Saskatchewan, Canada, where winter temperatures plummet to minus 40 degrees Fahrenheit in the winter, and it has been known to snow in every month, except July. Now I am adapting to the conditions in western Washington.

The first thing I noticed about the weather here is how much drier it is on the coast than inland. According to the Western Regional Climate Center (www.wrcc.dri.edu) Anacortes averages about 26 inches of rain a year compared with Mount Vernon's 32. What is similar for both centers, however, is how little of this precipitation falls from May to September, when many plants do most of their growing. These summer months average approximately 1.25 inches of rain for Anacortes and 1.7 inches for Mount Vernon. Nearly 50% of the annual precipitation falls from October to January, and July and August can pass without a drop.

One way to combat lack of summer rainfall is, of course, to add water, creating abundant moisture year-round. With increasing interest in water conservation in our area, the challenge for many home gardeners in Skagit County who want to save on watering their gardens, is to choose plants that can withstand dry feet in summer and wet ones in winter.

A good place to start is with plants native to this area. If you want to find out which native plants might be suitable for microclimates in your own garden, go to <http://gardening.wsu.edu/nwnative/> and click on "Plant Associations" in the Plant Identification Database. This section of the web site identifies the growing preferences of a wide range of native trees, shrubs, and groundcovers.

"Choosing the Right Plants"--one of the The Natural Lawn & Garden Series published by the Saving Water Partnership (www.savingwater.org) out of Seattle--includes lists of plants that grow well in different conditions in western Washington, including areas that stay wet in the winter and dry out in the summer. Their suggestions for wet winter/dry summer sites include vine maple (*Acer circinatum*) and shore pine (*Pinus contorta*), chokeberries (*Aronia*), barberries (*Berberis*), and red twig and red osier dogwoods (*Cornus alba* and cultivars, and *Cornus stolonifera* and cultivars). For perennials, they suggest, among others, wood anemone (*Anemone nemorosa*), daylilies (*Hemerocallis* cultivars), and western sword fern (*Polystichum munitum*).

Another good choice for wet winter/dry summer sites are spring-flowering bulbs. These plants grow and bloom in the months when there is plenty of moisture and go dormant when conditions go dry. This is one reason why the fields of the Skagit Valley are ablaze with daffodils and tulips in the spring.

The information provided in this news release is for education purposes only. Reference to commercial products or trade names is made with the understanding that no discrimination is intended and no endorsement by Cooperative Extension is implied. Cooperative Extension programs and employment are available to all without discrimination.

This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.