

Plant Now for Next Summer's Dry Season

By Brenda Cunningham
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Find the plant to suit your needs

Many of us spent an inordinate amount of time this summer watering to keep shrubs and trees alive. Now is a great time to examine our yards and identify areas we can renovate with drought-tolerant plant species to reduce water use and free up time for other pursuits in the garden.

As always, it is best to cluster plants with similar needs together, so don't put your new drought-tolerant plants next to thirsty shrubs and expect them to both do well.

One place to start renovations is along your yard's outer edges. These are the most difficult for the watering hose to reach and the most likely to be next to larger areas of natural habitat. Or, if this summer you found yourself spending more time and water in one area than you care to next summer, salvage the plants you enjoy from that area, cluster them with other water hogs and replant the vacant spot with species suggested here.

Native plants, like all additions to your garden, should be placed in sites with suitable soils and exposure and given some extra watering for the first few years. If you plant them this fall, you will be pleasantly surprised at how little extra watering they require next summer.

Many of our native plants are adapted to the wet winters and dry summers of the NW. Once established, these plants will tolerate extremely dry conditions. Here are some suggestions of northwest native species that not only tolerate our dry summers, but even thrive. Let's start with some trees to give your yard some structure.

Puget Sound juniper, *Juniperus maritima*, is very similar to the Rocky Mountain juniper, with a pretty blue-gray foliage. If you are fortunate, Cedar Waxwings will come to eat the berries. A number of native deciduous trees are also quite drought-tolerant. Douglas maple, *Acer glabrum*, does well without supplemental watering and does not get nearly as tall and brittle as the big-leaf maple. Garry oak, *Quercus garryana*, is the namesake of Oak Harbor and the only oak native to Western Washington. It grows slowly into an interesting shape and, just as other oaks, retains its dry leaves a long time, adding interest to the winter garden.

Native shrubs doing well this year, despite the drought, include tall Oregon grape, *Berberis aquifolium*. This species is a moderately tall, evergreen shrub that produces bright yellow flowers in the spring and blue fruit in the summer. Every northwest garden should have one to feed the bees and birds and give the garden some interest in winter.



Sedum autumn joy is drought tolerant, easy to grow, and adds a splash of color toward the end of summer. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

Red-flowering currant, *Ribes sanguineum*, is a popular native shrub, with dark pink blossoms in early spring and pretty round currant leaves through the summer. These shrubs prefer dry, well-drained soils, so should not be planted where they will be in standing water in the winter. Mock orange, *Philadelphus lewisii*, is a tall shrub with a profusion of white blossoms in early summer. It thrives in dry eastern Washington and does quite well here on the west side with no additional water.

Drought-tolerance doesn't have to mean growing only trees and shrubs. There is a wide-range of native perennial flowers that will tolerate low water conditions throughout the summer. Common and great camas, *Cammisia spp.*, are both early bloomers which die back to the ground in summer. They do best in spots that get no additional water in the summer. So, don't mix camas in with water-hungry annual flowers. Other flowers that thrive in dry heat include the stonecrops (*Sedum spp.*) which bloom midsummer, and native asters (*Erigeron spp.*) which bloom in late summer through the fall.

Several websites can help you find the native plant to suit your needs. King County has an extensive program to promote the use of native plants for their qualities of low maintenance, low water and fertilizer use, as well as hosting native pollinators. Use the search feature to narrow down the suggestions based on sun exposure and moisture regimes. Find King County's Native Plant Guide for homeowners at:

<https://green2.kingcounty.gov/gonative/index.aspx>



Above: Native asters can provide a late summer accent when other plants have wilted from drought. **Left:** Sedum autumn joy stands out against a blue spruce.
Photos by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.

Washington Native Plant Society also has a guide for landscaping with native plants. You can find lists of plants on this website categorized by moisture preference, but also by flower color, growth habit and sun exposure preference.

Washington Native Plant Society's plant lists for landscaping can be found at:

<http://www.wnps.org/landscaping/index.html>

Once you have decided what species to plant, look in the local commercial nurseries. Many native plant species are available as homeowners are choosing them to create lower maintenance areas in their yards. Keep an eye out this fall for Washington Native Plant Society chapter sales throughout western Washington. And in the spring there will be native plant sales at the conservation districts.

For more ideas and to see some of these plants in action, visit the Washington Native Plant Society's display garden next to the Master Gardener Discovery Garden at the WSU Research and Extension Center on Memorial Highway in Mount Vernon.

RESOURCES:

- Real Gardens Grow Natives. Eileen M. Stark. Skipstone. 2014.
- Encyclopedia of Northwest Native Plants for Gardens and Landscapes. Kathleen A. Robson, Alice Richter, and Marianne Filbert. Timber Press. 2008.
- King County Native Plant Guide. <https://green2.kingcounty.gov/gonative/index.aspx>.
- Washington Native Plant Society. <http://www.wnps.org/landscaping/index.html>.