

The Moisture-loving Garden: Transform Mud to Beauty

By Everett Chu
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Transform mud to beauty

To create a successful, sustainable garden requires the understanding of our local microclimates. That includes the hydrology – where water comes from, what it does on our land, and where it goes.

We typically have excess rainfall in the fall and spring with the moisture lingering through the entire winter. Water-saturated soil can suffocate the roots of less moisture-tolerant plants. On the other hand, we have an almost total lack of rainfall in the summer. The bone-dry soil in the summer, where there is no supplemental irrigation, can kill another group of plants not sufficiently drought tolerant. You may ask: Is there a common ground between the two extremes?

The answer is Yes! In our region full of hardpan soil with glacial till, the ground is often barely pervious. Therefore, unless significantly altered from its original makeup, our garden sites are more practically and suitably planted with moisture-tolerant plants. So, a moisture-loving “purposeful” garden, using plants adapted to both wet and dry conditions, is the answer.

Drought-tolerant plants are often desirable, usually for perceived water-wise, low-maintenance reasons. But if those plants can be killed (or made unhappy) by excess soil moisture during our long, wet season. Such gardens really cannot be called low-maintenance. Some examples of drought-tolerant plants that are extremely sensitive to excess moisture are *Choisya ternata* (Mexican orange blossom), *Cistus spp* (Rock Rose), *Lavandula spp.* (Lavender), and most conifers such as *Chamaecyparis obtuse* (*Hinoki cypress*).

Not surprisingly, you can find a great list of moisture-loving plants in the *Rain Garden Handbook for Western Washington*, published in 2013 by the Washington State Ecology Department and Washington State University Extension. In fact, of the 123 plants listed, 85 are considered moisture-loving: for zones 1 (wet) or 2 (moist), or both. Further, 52 of those 85 are native, which usually are well adapted to our wet-dry climates and sun-shade forest-succession cycles.

A moist garden does not have to be a full-blown, dedicated rain garden with a depression in the ground. A dry streambed dug in a shallow serpentine pattern across or residing at the bottom of a moist hill can serve as a secondary drainage system to intercept excess water. At several points the streambed can be dug deeper and serve almost as miniature rain gardens (if the soil drains sufficiently well). Within and along the streambed (filled with cobblestones and pebbles) are the perfect spots for your natural-looking, moisture-loving garden.



Three moisture-loving plants along a dry-stream bed at the bottom of a moist hill, from left to right: *Chelone lyonii* 'Tiny Tortuga' (Turtlehead), *Molinia caerulea* 'Variegata' (Purple Moor Grass), *Rodgersia* 'Bronze Peacock' (Roger's Flower). Photo by Everett Chu / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners

Suitable low spots in your garden can serve a similar purpose and do not need to be filled and leveled. Such moist pockets can increase the biodiversity of your garden and contribute to wildlife habitats.

The following are the 85 garden-worthy, moisture-loving plants on the Ecology/WSU rain garden plant list (for zones 1 and 2). The most moisture-tolerant ones (zone 1) are boldfaced, and the native plants are marked with an asterisk. It should be mentioned that nearly all are also considered drought tolerant (zone 3), so it would be hard to imagine a better plant list on which to build your successful, sustainable garden.

Large Shrub and Trees

Acer circinatum (Vine Maple)*

Amelanchier alnifolia (Western Serviceberry)*

Corylus cornuta (Beaked Hazelnut)*

Frangula purshiana (Cascara)*

Lonicera involucrata* (Black Twinberry)

Magnolia virginiana* 'Moonglow' (Sweet Bay or Swamp Magnolia)

Malus fusca* (Pacific Crabapple)
Myrica californica* (Pacific Wax Myrtle)
Oemleria cerasiformis (Indian Plum)*
Physocarpus capitatus* (Pacific Ninebark)
Sambucus caerulea (Blue Elderberry)



Left: A front-yard rain garden, including moisture-loving plants such as (*Blechnum spicant* (deer fern), *Carex testacea* (orange sedge) and *Carex oshimensis* 'Evergold' (*Variegated Japanese Sedge*)). **Right:** A rain garden in Anacortes planted exclusively with Ecology/WSU recommended plants. Photos by Everett Chu / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.

Small to Medium Shrubs

***Cornus sanguinea* 'Midwinter Fire' (Bloodtwig Dogwood)**
Cornus sericea* (Red-twig Dogwood)
Cornus sericea* 'Flaviramea' (Yellow-twig Dogwood)
Cornus sericea* 'Kelsey' (Dwarf Red-twig Dogwood)
Gaultheria shallon (Salal)*
Lonicera pileata (*Boxwood Honeysuckle*)
Mahonia aquifolium (Tall Oregon Grape)*
Mahonia aquifolium 'Compacta' (Compact or Dwarf Tall Oregon Grape)*
Mahonia nervosa (Low Oregon Grape)*
Mahonia repens (Creeping Mahonia)
Myrica gale* (Sweet Gale)
Philadelphus lewisii (Lewis' Mock Orange)
Physocarpus opulifolius (Common Ninebark)
Ribes bracteosum* (Stink Currant)
Ribes sanguineum (Red Flowering Currant)*
Rubus parviflorus (Thimbleberry)*
Rubus spectabilis* (Salmonberry)
***Salix purpurea* 'Nana' (Dwarf Blue Leaf Arctic Willow)**
***Sambucus nigra* 'Black Lace' (Black Lace Elderberry)**
Spiraea densiflora* (Subalpine spirea)
Spiraea douglasii* (Douglas Spirea)
Spiraea thunbergii and *Spiraea japonica* (Thunberg and Japanese Spirea)
Symphoricarpos albus (Snowberry)*

Symphoricarpos x doorenbosii 'Magic Berry' (Coralberry)
Symphoricarpos chenaultii 'Hancock' (Hancock Coralberry)
***Taxodium distichum* 'Peve Minaret' (Dwarf Bald Cypress)**
Thuja plicata 'Whipcord' (Dwarf Western Red Cedar)*
Viburnum opulus 'Nanum' (Dwarf Cranberry Bush)

Groundcovers, Grasses, Perennials, and Ferns

Acorus calamus 'Variegatus' (Sweet Flag)
***Acorus gramineus* 'Ogon' (Golden Variegated Sweet Flag)**
Aquilegia formosa (Western/Red Columbine)*
Arctostaphylos uva-ursi (Bearberry, Kinnikinnick)*
Asarum caudatum (Wild Ginger)*
Aster modestus (Great Northern Aster)*
Athyrium filix-femina* (Lady Fern)
Blechnum spicant* (Deer Fern)
Camassia leichtlinii (Large or Giant Camas)*
Camassia quamash (Common Camas)*
***Carex comans* 'Frosted Curls' (New Zealand Hair Sedge)**
Carex obnupta* (Slough Sedge)
Carex oshimensis 'Evergold' (Variegated Japanese Sedge)
***Carex testacea* (Orange New Zealand Sedge)**
Coreopsis verticillata or *C. lanceolata* (Tickseed)
Deschampsia cespitosa 'Northern Lights' (Tufted Hair Grass)
Dicentra formosa (Western or Pacific Bleeding Heart)*
Erigeron speciosus 'Darkest of All' (Showy Fleabane)*
Erysimum (Shrubby Wallflowers)
Fragaria chiloensis (Beach or Coastal Strawberry)*
Gaura lindheimeri (Gaura or Wand Flower)
Geranium cantabrigiense 'Biokovo' (Biokovo Hardy Geranium)
Geum (Avens)
Juncus acuminatus* (Taper-tipped Rush)
Juncus ensifolius* (Dagger-leaf Rush)
***Juncus patens* 'Elk Blue' (Spreading Rush)**
Juncus tenuis* (Slender Rush)
Hemerocallis (Daylily)
***Hesperantha* (syn. *Schizostylis*) *coccinea* (Crimson Flag)**
Heuchera (Coral Bells or Alumroot)
Hyssopus officinalis 'Rosea' or 'Nana' (Hyssop, pink or blue)
***Iris douglasiana* (Douglas Iris)**
Iris tenax* (Oregon or Tough-leaf Iris)
Liatris spicata (Gayfeather)
Miscanthus sinensis (Japanese Silver Grass)
***Molina caerulea* 'Variegata' (Variegated Moor Grass)**
Polystichum munitum (Western Sword Fern)*
Scirpus microcarpus* (Small-fruited Bulrush)
Sidalcea hendersonii* (Henderson's Checker-mallow)

Symphyotrichum chilense (Pacific Aster)*
Symphyotrichum subspicatus (Douglas Aster)*
Tellima grandiflora (Fringecup)*
Tiarella trifoliata (Foamflower)*
Tolmiea menziesii (Youth-on-age, Piggyback Plant)*
Trillium ovatum (Western Trillium)*
Vancouveria hexandra (Inside-out Flower or Duck's Foot)*

RESOURCES:

- ***Rain Garden Handbook for Western Washington: A Guide for Design, Installation, and Maintenance.*** Washington State Department of Ecology, Washington State University Extension. 2013. <https://fortress.wa.gov/ecy/publications/documents/1310027.pdf>
- ***Rain Gardens: Managing Water Sustainably in the Garden and Designed Landscape.*** Nigel Dunnett and Andy Clayton. Timber Press. 2007.
- ***What Plant Where: The Creative Guide to Choosing the Best Plants for Every Area of Your Garden.*** Roy Lancaster. DK Publishing. 1997.