



Dog Days of Summer

by Claudia Steen

We have had a very hot summer and are anticipating a few more hot weeks ahead of us. This article will focus on suggestions for protecting your plants from the intense sun and possibly dropping the air and soil temperature around your plants.

With the excessive heat this summer, many gardeners have turned to **shade cloth** to protect their crops and tender plants. Shade cloth is an open weave synthetic fabric that allows for somewhat reduced amounts of air, light, and water to pass through. Shade cloth is often used by commercial plant nurseries to cover greenhouses during the heat of the summer or to create shade houses for shade loving plants. Shade cloth may have advantages over other fabrics, for example cotton sheets can become heavy when wet, and there is no way to know how much light it blocks out. On the other hand, shade cloth is available in 30%, 60%, and 80% light reduction, with 60% being most commonly available at garden centers and big box stores. It is usually 6 feet wide and sold by the linear foot or sometimes comes in pre-measured lengths of 50 or 100 feet. Of course, many other sizes are available online but may require a minimum purchase that may be more than most home gardeners need.

Before buying shade cloth it is important to ask what you want it to do: reduce light or reduce heat? They are not the same! Shading for light intensity is different than shading for cooling. Black shade cloth provides the darkest shade but absorbs more of the sun's heat which means there is less cooling effect, and unless the plants are shade loving they may become spindly and leggy as they grow toward the light. Light colored shade cloth allows the same percentage of light to pass through but is more reflective so the light inside the structure bounces around more, making the light more usable to plants. The reflective nature of light-colored shade cloth means that it absorbs less heat and provides a slightly cooler environment. Many people automatically reach for black, brown, or dark green shade cloth to get the darkest shade, incorrectly assuming they will also get the best cooling effect. If you have already purchased dark shade cloth - no worries. The difference between the two is only a few degrees. By raising the fabric cover several feet above the leaf canopy and leaving one side open (the side away from direct sunlight) you will allow more reflected light to enter the structure and better ventilation to help vent the heat.

It is also very important to **water** in the morning when high temperatures are predicted and the best way to water is with drip irrigation tubing that puts water at the roots of the plants. Another trick is to use the "Magic of Mulch" that will help keep the soil moist with the added benefit of reducing the number of weeds. These help so the water does not evaporate as fast. This mulch

can be as easy as putting grass clippings on top of the soil around each plant in a garden. For flower beds it can be bark chips, wood chips or other mulches available at box stores or nurseries.

Watering with misters or micro emitters for 5-10 minutes 2-3 times a day during hottest part of the day can also lower the heat inside the structure by another 10 degrees for at least 30-60 minutes. Driving by orchards or vineyards in our valley - overhead watering or misters can be seen and are there to protect their crop. Some people report using less water inside shade cloth structures, as much as 65% less water, so be sure to adjust your irrigation as needed.



Last, but not least, be sure to take care of yourself and your pets. With the likelihood of continuing hot weather expected this month - it's important for you and your pets to stay hydrated by drinking water or

other liquids frequently. Also, it's best to avoid working outside during the heat of the day – so start early and stop when you become overheated or at least take frequent rest breaks in a shady spot. We usually have many cool nights during August so maybe wait until just before sundown to work in the refreshing cool of the evening. Either way, you will avoid the possibility of getting overheated, sunburned, and cranky. We want our gardens to be fun, rewarding, and productive – so we encourage “working smarter not harder.” And, as always, if you have any gardening questions feel free to contact our Master Gardener clinic at the WSU Extension.